

Pentecost 11, 8.16.2020

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8; Psalm 67; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:21-28

“Jesus Crosses All Borders”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.* Good morning. Thank you for joining us online for worship at St. Mark’s Lutheran Church.

What kind of borders have you crossed in your life? Borders are often difficult places to navigate, and many are not easily crossed. Borders can be geographic, like mountains, rivers, and oceans. Borders can be between geographic regions and between nations. Borders can exist between ethnic, cultural, and religious groups. Borders exist to separate, and even exclude, people from contact with one another. Borders can attempt to block the exchange of ideas, goods, and information. Borders can be used to separate the perceived purity of a group from the perceived impurity of another group.

All of today’s readings reassure us that God is a God who crosses borders. It is God’s mission to go out into the world so that the Lord’s house might be a place of prayer for all peoples, nations, and ethnicities. God crosses every conceivable border to reach all people and nations, because God is creating a new community, the church. Humans exclude, but God always seeks to include. Isaiah reminds us that God’s mercy extends to all people and nations.

We, along with all people, are included in this vision. In the second reading, Paul reminds us that the gifts and calling of God to his people Israel are irrevocable. The good news of the Christian message is that all peoples, nations, and ethnicities are grafted by faith onto the root of the covenant with Israel (Rom. 11:17ff). So Paul writes, “*If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you*” (Rom. 11:18). These words from Romans are crucial if we are to understand God’s welcome for all people. Paul’s words about remembering being grafted by faith onto the root of Israel are also crucial for us, because *we* are also foreigners and gentiles, who by God’s grace have been grafted onto the root of Israel by faith.

So in the Christian church there are no “us” and “them;” we are all “them” – we are all people who have been drawn into God’s mercy and grace from outside of Israel, and we all become a new “us” the body of Christ, the church. As Paul says, “*For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.*” We all need to hear this message over and over again, because we often make the mistake of thinking that we are the “insiders,” that the Gospel goes forth from us into the world. Rather, it is more accurate to say that the gospel goes forth *from God* into the world

drawing all people, and us, into the grace and mission of God.

In today's gospel, Jesus crossed with his disciples into the district of Tyre and Sidon, which is north of Galilee, beyond the border of Israel in present day Lebanon, south of Beirut. Jesus left Jewish territory, crossing a border into foreign territory. Jesus crossed the border into a land of gentiles and foreigners. The reason Jesus crossed this border is easy to imagine: He wanted to be alone, and he knew that Jewish crowds would probably not follow him. By crossing into Tyre and Sidon, Jesus was crossing a border into a place that was considered ritually impure and unclean for Jewish people. Jesus knew where he was going, and crossing a border into gentile territory foreshadows the Easter message of God's grace and mercy for all nations.

Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman is well known. Her daughter was ill and she sought Jesus' healing. Mark's gospel (Mk. 7:24-30) also records the event saying that she was a woman of Greek background. From this we know that Jesus was becoming well known even outside of Israel.

Yet Jesus did not answer her plea. Jesus was silent. The silence of Jesus causes us remember his silence before King Herod and before the Roman governor Pilate. Jesus' silence doesn't mean that Jesus didn't care or that Jesus hadn't heard her. Rather, in silence Jesus searches the heart of the Canaanite woman, and in silence Jesus also searches his own heart.

This becomes clear because when Jesus breaks his silence, he says, "*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*" This might have ended the conversation, but the woman knelt before Jesus and said, "*Lord, help me.*" It is a moment of profound meaning within the entire New Testament. It reminds us of the words, "*Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved*" (Rom. 10:13). Jesus' silence had searched the woman's heart causing her to commit herself in faith to Jesus.

This profound moment also invites us to think a bit more deeply. When has God's silence drawn you further into prayer? When has the silence of Jesus in your life made you dig more deeply into faith? When has the silence of God helped you ask for forgiveness for something troubling you? At what moments in your life have you been driven to kneel and pray for help? Such moments come to all of us, because we are all in need of healing, grace, and the liberation of forgiveness.

Yet the conversation of Jesus and the woman goes further. Jesus says, "*It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.*" Jesus was talking about the children of Israel and his mission in feeding them first. What is fascinating about this exchange is that the Greek word often translated as "dogs" actually means "puppies," making this sentence read "*It is not fair to take the*

*children's food and throw it to the puppies.*" Jesus' use of dry humor to soften the very sharp point that the Canaanite woman was a foreigner could have ended the entire encounter. However, the woman's reply was no less amazing, "*Yes, Lord, yet even the puppies eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.*" The contrast of both humor and the pathos of genuine human need in this conversation demonstrates how easily Jesus could connect with the reality of the Canaanite woman's foreignness and her genuine need. By meeting her where she was, Jesus invited her response of faith.

The significance of Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman is that it shows how *all of us* need the grace and forgiveness of God. We are all gentiles and foreigners who come as beggars into the Lord's house. We are beggars – needy and vulnerable, unable to save ourselves, unable to forgive ourselves, unable to heal ourselves. We also wait expectantly for crumbs of grace from the master's table.

The episode is well known, but the last thing that Martin Luther wrote was found a scrap of paper in the room where he died: "We are all beggars. This is true." Luther realized that like the Canaanite woman, in the end, we all come to God empty-handed, in direst need of grace and forgiveness. The good news is that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The Word became Jesus who crosses all borders to meet us where we are, as we are – empty-handed – with grace and mercy.

With kneeling persistence the Canaanite woman displays not simply the begging of a puppy dog, rather she continues to witness to us the *humility* of faith, the *dependence* of faith, the *gratitude* of faith. She shows us what obedience to Christ looks like, as she says, "*Lord, help me.*"

Jesus also shows us what salvation and grace look like: A God who crosses all borders to bring the power of grace, forgiveness, and healing to us. Grace restores us. In silence, Jesus searches us and drives us more deeply into prayer and reliance upon him. Because of her faith, Jesus says, "*Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish. And her daughter was healed instantly.*" Faith heals us. Trust in God transforms us to look to the one who continues to suffer with all humanity. This doesn't mean that we will stop having illness or hardship, or that we will not die; rather, through faith we know in whose hands our future belongs.

We continue to live in a world that is badly broken and fractured by human-made borders. We are separated from one another by the borders of nation, ethnicity, and gender, by borders of racism, sexism, classism. These are not geographic borders, rather they are borders produced by human

beings. These borders have changed over time; they are not eternal or permanent. We look at some people as “insiders” and others as “outsiders.” We look at some people as “impure” and, tellingly, very often we count ourselves as the “pure” and righteous ones. What will never change is that Christ Jesus continues to cross every border to reach the needs of all people with grace and mercy.

We, too, live in a time of great need, a time of pandemic when borders are very real. We are separated by borders of social distance; borders of ethnicity, class, and economic privilege; borders with weighty political baggage. Some have not seen loved ones in months. Some continue to be confined to quarantine, and some have died in quarantine, separated from loved ones. The fear of death as a final border is one that we are acutely aware of in our time. Death is the final border that all of us will cross. The good news is that Jesus died and was raised giving us hope in eternal life, hope in his resurrection.

Jesus came into this world to cross all borders, even the border of death. There is no border that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Jesus himself became a foreigner, was rejected and died so that no border, not even death, is able to separate us from God’s love, mercy, and healing. There is new life even in the border of death. In a world of “us” and “them,” in a world of borders, Christ shows us how to be merciful. How is Christ calling you to cross the borders around you to help others? How is Christ calling you to show mercy in a world of borders? Christ has welcomed us so that we might cross all borders to welcome others. Amen.