**Sermon – 8-20-23 – *Jesus Crosses that Border***

* 12th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
* Matthew 15:21-28, Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

(With gospel texts from previous 2 Sundays in mind)

Grace and Peace…

You know, it might seem that the narrative of the gospels is just a bunch of random stories put together. But there really is a pattern of intention to it all…

These last couple of weeks we’ve looked at stories that describe Jesus going out into harsh, scarry places – a deserted place (or wilderness) – and then out on the water coming to the disciples in the boat during a storm.

And these 2 stories about comfort and care from God in harsh places follow a quite disturbing event in the story… the beheading of John the Baptist. Chapter 14 of Matthew starts with the execution of John. And what follows are these two stories of encountering God in classic settings of places where humans are ill-equipped to exist.

So, it seems that what Matthew is saying here is that after such a horrendous experience of losing a loved one to the needless greed and power of the ruling system – after that kind of loss, we should remind ourselves that God is willing and able to seek us out and care for us even in these desolate, stormy places of grief and pain.

Then, Matthew does it again. In Chapter 15, Matthew starts out with an encounter with the Pharisees and scribes. It demonstrates the entrenched obstinance and pride on the part of the religious elite – situations that grieve Jesus for his own faith leaders’ lack of care for the needy, but seemingly endless supply of ambition for empty ritual and tradition.

There are two painful things in our world – death (especially pointless death that happens because some are rich and others are poor)… and loss of relevance – the death of usefulness and purpose in our world.

So, the gospel depicts these two sad realities. And then the story shows us what to do… and what we are to do is trust in God.

In the deserted, wilderness place, Jesus fed 5000 plus people with only a few loaves and fish.

On the sea, Jesus came, walking on the water, to calm the storm and alleviate the fears of the disciples.

Today’s story also relates the truth of pain – and the remedy that the gospel prescribes.

The story of a Canaanite Woman who is at first ignored, then rebuffed by Jesus and disregarded like a stray dog, is perhaps one of the most unusual stories about Jesus.

Jesus is uncharacteristically aloof and downright mean to this woman. But the woman is tenacious. The woman has a need, and she will not give up until she receives satisfaction.

These aren’t just random stories… this isn’t just a recounting of “first Jesus did this and then Jesus said that…”. These episodes are put together for a purpose – the purpose of convincing us that when Jesus is around, good things happen – especially good things in the midst of pain and suffering.

How many of us have grieved like Jesus grieves when the leaders of his faith put more into rituals and traditions than into the desire of God to care for the neighbor? We ask ourselves, “Why are fewer people attending church these days?” and “Why don’t young people want anything to do with church?”

Well, we have answers to those questions if we are willing to hear them… The answer, by and large, is that people, especially young people have watched what the church does and listened to what the church has said is most important in the world… and they’ve heard NOT the love of neighbor, care for creation, and concern for the needy in the world.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2016/08/24/why-americas-nones-left-religion-behind/>

What they see and hear is judgement against people of color and the queer community, a rejection of science and the need for healthcare especially for women, and a superiority for themselves over all other religions and belief systems.

The reason the church is not relevant to many in our world anymore is similar to the reasons Jesus criticized his own religious tradition – propping up the institution rather than heeding the compassionate, generous will of God is not what faith is supposed to be about (Mt 15:6).

So, now… with that background in mind, listen to the narrative of the Canaanite woman.

Jesus came to a place outside his own people’s borders. A foreign woman came to him, recognizing him as the messiah, asking for help for her daughter who had a demon. And Jesus ignored her. The woman was insistent, and the disciples became annoyed. They wanted Jesus to send her away. Even Jesus seemed bothered. He came right out and said it… “I was sent only to help the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But the woman got right up into Jesus’ space… she knelt at his feet and said, “Help me.”

“Now, apparently, Jesus had had enough… this Canaanite woman wasn’t even a person of his own faith. Jesus lashed out, “It’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

The woman, without missing a beat, said, “Yes, you’re right. But even the dogs get to eat what falls to the floor beneath their master’s table.”

In that moment, Jesus’ whole perspective on the encounter changed and he saw the woman and her deep care for her daughter in a new light. Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith is tremendous! May everything that you need be done for you.”

And although the woman may have never quite put 2 and 2 together (the timing doesn’t really matter), her little girl was healed in that very moment.

John the Baptist is murdered – and Jesus goes on to show that even in the worst of times God will give us what we need – food in deserted places – and God will come to us – walking on the water if he needs to – and calm the storms of life.

Our religious systems fail us and the people of our world – and Jesus shows us exactly how that looks and feels through the anguish of a woman dismissed and disregarded. And Jesus shows us how to be tenacious, and to not give up, and to trust that religious systems failing does not mean that God has failed you.

In Romans 11, Paul puts it plainly… The people of God have NOT been rejected. And the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.

In the Disney movie, Lilo and Stich, the alien creature, Six-Two-Six, is created with tremendous gifts – innumerable abilities. And yet, because of the greed and hatred of those around him, the only expression of those gifts that anyone experiences are of destruction and pain. Six-Two-Six hurts people and breaks things.

But Lilo, a little girl in Hawaii, loves the creature she calls Stitch… despite his tendency to pillage and destroy, Lilo offers love. And in the end it is love, and family, and trust in one another that allows the characters in the story to understand one another, and peace to prevail.

Our problem in this world is that we have trouble understanding one another because of the pain we experience – sometimes by our own fault – sometimes at the hands of others… But that pain causes us to distrust and scrutinize the otherwise good gifts that we might give and receive.

Rather than embrace our neighbors for their differences or reach out to people in new ways, we hide behind our pre-conceived notions and traditions of the way things “should be” or “always have been.” The Canaanite woman represents those outside our borders and of differing sets of beliefs. And because we refuse to hear her – even acknowledge her existence – her gifts are ignored – even the precious gift of her own daughter.

But God has declared that this way of thinking will be no more. Just as Jesus declared that the people in a deserted place should eat even though there were only 5 loaves and 2 fish. Just as Jesus was determined to come to the place where the boat was even though he had to walk on water and through a storm to get there. God will not let us hide behind the comforts and conveniences of our past – but God calls us to hear the voices in the world that come to us, persistent, begging: “Help us.”

For God hears our cries when we are in deserted places, and stormy places, and outside whatever arbitrary borders this world throws up between us and God’s promise. Jesus crosses that border – and even if it goes against the rules of our tradition – especially if it goes against the rules… Jesus says to us, “Great is your faith. Great is the gift that God has given you to be all that you are called to be in this world.”

And in that moment – although the timing really doesn’t matter – God heals us and restores our relationships. God brings us together as one family of faith regardless of calls that we ought to be sent away.

God’s place is in the middle of our lives – in the pain and the joy – in the old and the new – in the innumerable gifts that we are to one another.