

# “Boundary Breakers”



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Boundaries, we all have them but we don't always recognize a boundary unless one gets broken.

Several years ago when I was the Associate Pastor of Youth and Children for the First Presbyterian Church of Columbus, I remember a particular youth Sunday (actually I will never forget it). The youth and I along with helping parents had planned the youth program for that day. When the final rehearsal came, I had to leave early. The next day as the youth did their skit, they included a part that had not been there before. One of the youth, named Ben, jumped up on the communion table and held another youth over the side of the table by his ankles. For what purpose you might ask? I don't remember. What I remember is the direct look I received from my Head of Staff. I knew in that moment that there was repair work that would need to be done. The youth and the parents helping that night apparently didn't realize that a serious boundary was broken within that congregation. This was God's table of grace that the youth was standing on.

Perhaps the offense taken by the congregation, and rightly so, helps us to understand how the Jewish people might have felt when Jesus began pushing beyond their rituals and traditions. It would have made them at least this uncomfortable if not more.

In this text, Jesus even pushes the reader beyond our comfort zones. Jesus has traveled to the region of Tyre, located in present day Lebanon, about 12 miles north of the Israel-Lebanon border, to get away and rest. Clearly, Jesus was in an area where people were not Jewish and would have been considered the 'other'. Listen for the word of God as it comes to us from Mark 7: 24-30:

*From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go--the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.*

**This is the word of God.**

As readers of God's word, we believe we understand how things are supposed to be with Jesus. Jesus has compassion on 'sinners', Jesus eats with tax collectors, Jesus talks with Roman officials, Jesus performs miracles feeding the 5,000 and the list continues.

Then, here comes this story. It is the kind of story that makes you read it more than once. You can't believe your ears. Jesus – my Jesus – your Jesus – tells a woman with a deep concern for her little daughter that "it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs". What?? Did Jesus – my Jesus – your

Jesus – just refer to this Gentile woman as a dog? Does the reading of this text sound as if this woman is too lowly for Jesus to help because she is not ‘one of the children’?

Jesus, the One who is always teaching that God’s law supersedes religious law and the laws of humankind, seems now to be following the Jewish ritual and customs. Jesus who has been the boundary breaker seems wrapped up in ritual and custom.

Everywhere else in scripture we read about Jesus helping all and not just the Jewish people but everyone he came into contact with showing the Jewish religious leaders that they are defiantly using their traditions and rules to rule out those that God would welcome. So, what is happening? Does Jesus not want to help this woman? Why would Jesus refer to the woman as a dog? Tough words.

So where does a pastor begin with texts that are tough like this one. First, this pastor looks to see what some scholars in the Greek language say. The scholars I researched have tried to use the intricacies of the Greek language to soften what Jesus said here. One commentary said the Greek should be translated to say, “little dog,” which would refer to a house pet that people love and so therefore what Jesus said is not ‘technically’ an insult.

I also read a sermon on this text where the preacher talked about other dog metaphors in the English language insinuating that Jesus was saying the woman was “as cute as a puppy” if she was endearing or he meant she was a “bulldog” as if she was a hard worker or “top dog” if she was an authoritative sort. Of course, I could not take this preacher seriously.

Several pastors suggested in their sermons that Jesus was ‘testing’ the woman; that he was always going to heal the girl, but

he just wanted to see the strength of the Syrophenician woman's faith first as if she had to meet Jesus' expectation for her to receive God's grace.

And while I appreciate what all these interpretations were trying to do (after all, no one wants to believe that Jesus could be that harsh or do anything other than welcome all people into the grace of God's kingdom on earth), sometimes we are called to wrestle with the hard parts of the bible and not try to explain them away just like we have to wrestle with the tough issues of our own day and we cannot always explain them away.

The more I read the text, the more that I began to understand that instead of Jesus being the one who talks the love, mercy, compassion and inclusion into the reign of God, it is this lowly woman – a Gentile – a person from a different culture who builds the case for her inclusion in the household of God.

The Syrophenician woman tells Jesus that even the dogs are allowed to eat of the crumbs that fall from the table and tells Jesus that even though the dog may be the lowest part in the household, the dog is still a part of the household and deserving of food.

So here is this incredibly brave and daring woman who has the tenacity to declare to Jesus that even though she is being referred to as being as lowly as a dog (which I believe this is what Jesus was doing), she **IS** part of God's household and as part of God's household - she should receive the crumbs that may fall.

What we have is a boundary breaking moment. Here a lowly, gentile woman is declaring the reign of God in their midst.

Who is teaching on how far the love and mercy of God will extend? It is this unclean, Syrophenician Gentile woman – the

lowest of the low. Out of her mouth – comes nothing that defiles her. She has spoken the truth of the gospel or as the Epistle of James would say, “God has chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs to the Kingdom of God.”

Scriptures like this make me wonder:

- Where are the limits to God’s love and mercy?
- Are there limits?

So far with Jesus, God’s love and mercy has extended to tax collectors, Roman officials, those possessed with demons, the prodigal son, Jew and Gentile, the woman caught in adultery and the list continues. It means that in Christ Jesus there is room in God’s love and mercy for all of us.

James says in 2:8 “we do well if we really fulfill the royal law according to scripture which says, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

While differences in people mattered in the society in which Jesus lived and still matter in the eyes of the society that we live in, differences do not matter in the eyes of God. The wonder of God’s grace and mercy is that no one is on the outside. No one. It does not matter if you are young or old, if you are white or a person of color, gay or straight, male, female or describe your sexual orientation in some other way, if you are rich or poor or a citizen or immigrant. It does not matter if you have special needs or you struggle with anxiety, depression or mental illness. It does not matter if you are highly educated or never had the opportunity to pursue your education. It does not matter if you own a mansion or are living in homelessness. It does not matter if you are sober or struggle with addiction.

It is not up to us to decide who will receive God's love, grace and mercy. The truth is that everyone has access to God. Differences may divide us from one another, but those differences will never separate us from the love of God (do you hear the Apostle Paul here?).

As we come to this table today, may we all be reminded that we too have our own place at God's table. We can speak with assurance that God welcomes us. God has welcomed us not because of who we are, not because of anything we have done, not because of any 'tests' we have passed, we are welcome because of God's willingness through the life of Jesus to include us.

**Let us pray:** Thank you Holy God for the examples of those who would break what we consider to be boundaries in order to show us the wideness of your mercy that is wider than the sea. We thank you for showing us the depth of inclusion of your love. Just as this woman likely astonished those watching and listening, we ask that as we go to Your table, we capture that same courage to break boundaries in Your name and to have brave conversations surrounding our own prejudices about who is included in your reign. Amen