

Making Room for One More
August 14, 2011 Proper 15A
Matthew 15:21-28
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Imagine you're in the third grade. You head outside to play kickball during recess. A couple of your classmates volunteer to be captains. They start choosing up sides. One captain picks a best friend. The other picks one of the fastest runners. A strong kicker gets selected, then a couple of the more popular kids. They're about half done and you're painfully aware that no one has yet picked you.

The longing to be included—to be picked for the team, to be invited to the prom, to join the club—is a basic human desire. There are few joys in life like being wanted, chosen, embraced. There are few pains in life like being excluded, rejected, left out.

The woman in our gospel wants to be included. To be more specific, she's hoping for an "in" with the rabbi named Jesus. And she's desperately praying that he can be of some help with her daughter. At first glance, the woman doesn't have much going for her. She's a Canaanite—Jews don't mix with her kind. She's from a poor, rural area—who pays attention to poor people? Her daughter is suffering a terrible affliction—which is often looked upon as a punishment for sin. Add it up and you have a woman who knows all too well the pain of not being picked for the team.

There are other reasons to exclude her as well, religious reasons. Judaism in the first century, like a lot of religions, had a tendency to be exclusive. It defined itself by certain laws and customs, by who's in and who's out. People got excluded on the basis of race (anybody not a Jew), physical problems (lepers, cripples, demon possessed), and even the wrong profession (tax collectors, pigeon keepers, those who tanned leather). These "outsiders" were considered unclean. To associate with them would make Jesus and his disciples unclean. Better to keep their distance, or so the law said.

Clearly, the woman in our story doesn't care one wit about Jewish laws and customs. She's got a sick little girl at home. Desperate times call for desperate measures. She marches up to Jesus and cries out: "Lord, have mercy." Isn't that interesting—even though she's a foreigner, she uses the appropriate language of an Israelite. She pleads for God's mercy, which when you think about it, is the only hope she has.

From the sounds of it, this seems to be yet another sad story of exclusion. Jesus doesn't give her to time of day, at least not at first. The disciples quickly follow suit. But the woman tags

along anyway. Pretty soon the disciples grow sick and tired of listening to her. *Hey, we're up here to get away. She's bothering us, Jesus. Get rid of her.*

The disciples' actions, we can understand. They're being their normal small-minded selves. But Jesus' actions, we can't understand. What's going on? Why the exclusiveness? Why does it seem that people are always dividing up the world into *us* and *them*?

My kids, Erik and Ingrid, went to a private high school in Bloomington named Trinity. Trinity was connected with a charismatic Catholic congregation known as People of Praise. Erik and Ingrid both played on their high school soccer teams. As a nervous dad, I paced the sidelines during the games. In the process, I got to know many of the parents from People of Praise. I found them to be friendly and polite. Still, time and again I experienced a disconnect. I'd find myself chatting with one of them. Then a friend from People of Praise would walk by. Suddenly it was as if I didn't exist. There'd be hugs and smiles and pats on the back. It soon became abundantly clear that I wasn't one of them. Now I'm sure it wasn't intentional. But it made me feel like an outsider. A little wall began to form.

Ever since Cain and Abel, I think, the human race has been building walls. It happens in the backseat of the van between quarreling siblings: *You better not cross this line or I'm telling Mom.* It happens between husbands and wives, Christians and Muslims, conservatives and liberals. *You better not do something I don't like or I'm going to make you pay.*

Jesus only seems to add to these walls when he finally speaks to the woman: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." That's bound to sting. Jesus then repeats a popular proverb: "It's not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Ouch! Even though the word Jesus uses for dogs is more like "puppy dogs," it sounds cruel. It sounds exclusive. *You don't belong here. You're not one of us.*

What's going on? It's hard to say exactly. Some interpreters see Jesus' words as a test – a test for the disciples to see if they'll open up their hearts to a Gentile; a test for the Canaanite woman to see if she'll persevere in her request. I don't like this interpretation. It makes Jesus seem manipulative at best and mean-spirited at worst.

I prefer to think that Jesus has a very specific focus to his earthly ministry. His primary work is calling Israel to repentance. Jesus, as a human being, has limits. He can't go everywhere and help everyone. So while on earth, he has blinders on. When someone like this woman

approaches him, he has to stop what he's doing, delay where he's going, and turn his attention to her.

Then again, when Jesus does this, a surprising thing happens. He finds out this woman won't take no for an answer. Instead of heading home and feeling sorry for herself, she gets into a sparring match with him: "Yes, Lord, I agree, the children deserve their bread. But even puppy dogs get to eat the few little crumbs that fall from their master's table. Can't you help us, please? Lord, have mercy!"

For the woman, this encounter is not about insiders and outsiders, Israelites and Canaanites. No, it's a simple choice between despair and hope. She chooses hope. She lives by the adage, "Never, ever give up." Jesus is impressed. He exclaims, "Woman, your faith is great. Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter is healed instantly.

So, what does an odd little story like this have to say to us? At the core, I think, it's about the wideness of God's mercy. Present story notwithstanding, Jesus seems to find time for a wide assortment of folks: Canaanites and Samaritans, tax collectors and prostitutes, rich men and poor women. About the only folks Jesus can't seem to stomach are the religious types who think they're better than everybody else. And that's interesting, because ever since Jesus left this earth, his followers have been struggling with the choice between who's in and who's out. In the early church, they almost came to blows over whether or not to include the Gentiles. In recent decades, the church has struggled over the role of women, the place of those who are divorced, the presence of gays and lesbians. Somebody once said, "The most segregated time in America is 11 o'clock on Sunday morning." And it's probably true. Lord, have mercy.

Sometimes the issue of who's in and who's out becomes very personal. I remember the Listening Posts we had when I first arrived at Zumbro. It was a chance for me to get to know the congregation. I learned a lot from those who attended, but I was genuinely surprised by some of the responses: any number of people said that Zumbro felt cliquy to them. They weren't one of the insiders. They couldn't call many by name. They didn't get asked to be on the team. Friends, I don't think we do this intentionally, but it happens. We gravitate toward those we know. That's why the two-minute connection is so important.

As Sue Jenkins mentioned earlier, we are setting aside *40 Days* this fall to build up our church. We're calling it *God's Building Project*. Why 40 days? Because 40 is a biblical number. It's a time of renewal and growth. What are we going to do? Three main things: 1) read and study

the book of Ephesians on Sunday morning; 2) attend small groups to follow up on the themes from Sunday; and 3) do small group service projects in the community. At the heart of it, it's about God building up a church, this church, by helping us make room for as many as we can.

How important is it to make room for people? I've been reading a compelling book entitled *Same Kind of Different as Me*. It's about setting aside our prejudices and making room in our lives for someone God might send our way. It's a true story. It tells of what happens when a white, upscale art dealer named Ron meets up with a black, homeless drifter named Denver. One day they met at the Union Gospel Mission in Ft. Worth, Texas. Ron only came to the mission because his wife dragged him along. It was their weekly outreach project. After awhile, at the encouragement of his wife, Ron asked Denver to go out for coffee. Ron had to ask more than once because Denver was extremely guarded. He was convinced Ron wanted something from him, even if it was only to alleviate his rich, white-man's guilt. But Ron kept asking and eventually Denver said yes. They hit it off—sort of—but it was one awkward step at a time. Lots of misconceptions had to be set aside; layers and layers of pain had to be stripped away.

These two continued to go out for coffee. One day Denver did a little pushing, "What do you want from me?" Ron felt a twinge of guilt. "Umm, I just want to be your friend." Denver raised his eyebrows in a measure of disbelief. "Let me think about it," he said.

A few days later they went out for coffee again. Denver started in, "I've been thinking a lot about what you asked me." Ron froze. He had no idea what Denver was talking about. "What did I ask you?" Denver replied, "About bein your friend." Ron's jaw dropped open. Denver went on, "There's something I heard 'bout white folks that troubles me. I heard that when white folks go fishin, they do something called *catch and release*." Ron nodded.

"That really bothers me," said Denver. "I just can't figure it out. 'Cause when colored folks go fishin, we really proud of what we catch, and we take it and show it off to everybody. Then we eat what we catch...in other words, we use it to *sustain* us. So it really bothers me that white folks would go to all that trouble to catch a fish, then when they done caught it, just throw it back in the water."

Denver finished what he was saying, "So, Mr. Ron, it occurred to me: If you is fishin for a friend you just gon' catch and release, then I ain't got no desire to be your friend." Ron could feel his heart pounding. Then Denver spoke more softly: "But if you is lookin for a *real* friend, then I'll be one. Forever."

How important is it to make room for people? More than we know. It can change a life...both their life and yours. Ron and Denver went on to become close friends and it broke down the wall between them. What about you? Is there someone for whom you need to make room? Maybe it's someone at church you haven't noticed before. Maybe it's a person at work who's especially difficult. Maybe it's a person of another color or a troublesome neighbor or someone in your extended family.

Jesus is in the business of making room for people. Even though it happens in a round about way in today's gospel, he makes room for all sorts of people, including the likes of you and me. Time and again Jesus shows just how wide God's mercy really is. There's more room than we could ever imagine.

How about this: how about—in response to God's mercy—you go to someone, make room for them, and tear down some walls? Amen.