

## *The Lines We Draw*

*Psalm 133; Matthew 15: 10-28*

Recorded message and to thank the tech team for working with me to make this happen. I am currently in strict isolation as my family prepares to spend time with a friend who is severely immune compromised. My whole family needs to quarantine right now and then will be tested before we can see our friend and his family. This is such a strange time we're living in. All these rules; 2 meters apart, face masks in public spaces, no large gatherings, or no small gatherings indoors. Throughout my ministry I have preached on eradicating boundaries, breaking down barriers, bringing people in and moving beyond the lines we draw around our faith, and now I'm having to draw lines, I'm having to say for the health of my friend please don't come within 6 feet of me, for the health of my friend I cannot come to the church to deliver this message with the rest of the worship team. But even before my quarantine started this past Friday I would go to a store and I'd see people in there not wearing their mask and I wouldn't go in and I admit I'm judging. And oh, I'm a huge, huge supporter of strong public education and I love that the school my son has been attending for years is so diverse ethnically, economically. I love that his school is actively working to breakdown boundaries in our society, but this fall I may be exercising my privilege, a privilege I know many don't have and keeping him home in our exclusive bubble to homeschool him. This is such a strange time and it's such a scary time and it's challenging in so many ways, the isolation, the distrust of others. Are they keeping distance in the same way that I am? The lack of routine or too much monotony, but this pandemic is challenging us who call ourselves Christian in other ways.

When good science and medical advice runs counter to the theology of inclusion and embrace that we espouse when even Jesus the one whom we follow says hand washing isn't necessary. For me finding a progressive Christianity of welcome and inclusion and reaching out for the other it was like finding home. I had long been isolated from Christianity particularly the more dogmatic and individualistic Christianity of my youth. There was a song that we sang in Sunday school when I was a kid maybe some of you know; it went something like this, 'the B-I-B-L-E yes that's the book for me, I stand alone on the word of God, the B-I-B-L-E.' And that song, it terrified me as a young child, 'I stand alone.' Now I know, now that the word alone has sort of layers of meaning and the song is really saying the foundation of my faith rests entirely upon the Bible, but that doesn't fit into a cutesy kid song. And at that time as a young child I just had this

image of myself stranded on top of a huge book all alone no one else around and as I grew older I rejected the faith of exclusion and a faith that excluded homeless people from attending, that excluded queer Christians from membership, that excluded women from leadership and excluded different races from worshipping together. I thought that I would never find a home within Christianity again. And then, then I discovered a Jesus that said, “Y'all come. Everyone is welcome and I mean everyone including you. I found a Jesus I equated with the love in Edwin Markham's poem: ‘he drew a circle that shut me out, heretic, rebel a thing to flout. But love and I had the wit to win. We drew a circle and took him in.’ But now how do we draw the circle to include others when there is so much division? Some of this division is mandated by science medicine and public health authorities, some is exacerbated by the pandemic and some well it's just plain old classism, racism, homophobia, partisan politics, patriarchy I could go on and on and on.

So, all this this is to say that I am really struggling with the passage this week. And this passage, this gospel reading has always been one of my favorite passages in all of scripture. I always squeal with delight when it comes up in the lectionary or other preaching opportunity. I love this passage because it's messy and so human and contradictory and hard just like the faith I've come to embrace. And I love it because Jesus is kind of a jerk, well maybe not because he is kind of a jerk, well yeah kind of because he is kind of a jerk, because it shows his humanness. And I love it because when Jesus is kind of a jerk there's this feisty, uppity woman, an outsider, a Gentile woman, and she dares to step out of place and call him out on his bad behavior. And I love it because Jesus changes; he grows, his circle becomes wider to include the Canaanite woman, to include all Gentiles and eventually to include all the world. I also love it because I have always adored the Bible stories that include a struggle, a challenge, a wrestling with God; because in my experience that's what faith is, a worshipful struggle with the divine. So I adore this text it's got that struggle, it's got the humanness and it's got the ever widening circle but how do I preach the message of that ever widening circle, that expanding circle of inclusion in such a time as this. I really don't know. I'm struggling like Abraham arguing with God, Jacob wrestling with God, this feisty persistent woman deserving of grace arguing with Jesus and I'm not finding any easy answers. It's a troublesome passage in a troublesome time. Where is the good news that we as Christians are called to be bearers of?

Theologian Debbie Thomas asserts in every situation no matter how terrible or seemingly hopeless we are called to hold out the lifegiving, death defying, world changing promise of the gospel. The promise that a good and loving God is even now leaning towards us with love and mercy and justice and healing. The promise that God's saving, reconciling, liberating power is available for all people, in all places, always: for all people in all places at all times. So, that means now; amidst a pandemic, when people wearing mask are called brainless sheep and people not wearing them are called callous, uncaring, selfish jerks. And that means here, here in Edmonton where government cuts have many questioning whether schools can open safely,

where a camp for homeless persons has neighbors fearing for their own personal safety, and that means for all of us; for you, for me. So how do we do that? How do we preach that good news? How do we bear it, proclaim it in real life, in our actual everyday circumstances when God's generosity chafes against our own fears and prejudices and suspicion and doubts and seemingly runs counter to good health advice? So, I guess let's do what we always do, let's go wrestle with this scripture a little bit. Perhaps this week's gospel story, disturbing as it is, will offer us some answers, some comfort. As it turns out even Jesus struggled with his radical calling. Even Jesus had to grow into a comprehensive all inclusive, understanding of God's generosity in his time and his place. There are two parts of the gospel lesson today and relating the two stories may not seem natural. There are different geographical locations involved, different audiences encounter Jesus and apparently different issues are addressed, but maybe not.

Let's start with the first and this is the one that runs counter to the advice from Dr. Deanna Hinshaw about washing hands. The pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem criticize Jesus because his disciples do not observe the tradition of ritual cleansing. Ritual cleansing which leads to ritual purity and thus guarding against ritual contamination. This is somewhat analogous to our concern regarding protection from Covid-19. But let's set that aside for a moment. During the ensuing debate about ritual, traditions, the will of God; Jesus makes a strong pronouncement. He says it is not what enters the stomach, but what exits the heart that is of concern for God and for all seeking to be God's people. In principle this idea of what comes out is what defiles us. This became the position of the Christian community on food, laws in practice, however the church has struggled for a long time over this matter as the book of Acts testifies because non-observance of food laws meant opening table fellowship to persons excluded because of food regulations. In effect Jews and Gentiles could now eat together and a major barrier had fallen, but had it? Did all followers of Jesus accept this inclusivity? To accept a principle and engage in its practice are often miles apart as Jesus himself reveals in the second part of today's gospel reading.

Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman. In the district of Tyre and Sidon so far from his home in a foreign country, a Gentile country, Jesus is met by a Canaanite woman. Now according to Fred Craddock, the use of this ancient term is strange and perhaps it's a dramatic way of just highlighting her status as an outsider even further. As Jesus and his friends go about their business this Canaanite woman approaches them and starts shouting, "have mercy on me Lord, son of David. My daughter is tormented by a demon." And to the woman's plea Jesus is silent, he ignores her. This woman is tenacious, she loves her daughter, she needs help and she's not afraid to make a scene; she keeps shouting until the disciples asked Jesus to please send her away, she's being such a nuisance. Finally, Jesus looks at her and explains, I was sent to the lost sheep of the House of Israel. Still the woman is undeterred, she falls to her knees and says, "Lord help me." Jesus doesn't help. Instead he answers her with words that cut no matter how hard we try to soften them. He says, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." He

calls her a dog. Now try as we may there is just no getting around this insult. Some scholars suggest that because the Greek uses the diminutive word cynaria or little dogs at the texts referring to puppies or small lap dogs he goes really that doesn't make it any better. Besides according to Rawin Wittly there is enough archaeological and historical evidence to tell us that the dogs in Jesus day had a lot more in common with coyotes or hyenas than fluffy toy poodles or sweet Cocker spaniels or big friendly Golden retrievers. The Jews just didn't have dogs for pets. The dogs that were around were probably semi-domesticated, safe to roam around town, but their primary function was garbage disposal. They were scavengers lurking in the shadows, feeding on whatever they might get. They were diseased and dirty, always nosing around the garbage for anything to satisfy their scraggly bodies. If you recall it was dogs that ate the remains of Queen Jezebel, dogs also licked the wounds of Lazarus as he sat outside the rich man's gate wanting to eat the table scraps from the rich man's table. Because they might feed on corpses dogs were considered unclean and Gentiles were called dogs as an expression of contempt because they too were considered unclean and defiled by their dietary customs. But I don't believe any of this justifies Jesus degrading this Gentile woman by calling her dog. And just because everyone else was doing it doesn't make it right. Besides as you recall just immediately prior to this in the text Jesus challenged the Pharisees and scribes and his own disciples in mandatory and matters of dietary traditions by saying it's not what comes in that defiles, but it's what comes out that defiles, it is not what comes into the stomach, but what exits through the mouth. Jesus had just finished explaining that it's not what one eats that makes him unclean, but what they do and what they say. So, this just doesn't hold up and regardless of how I tried to explain or contort this text. I cannot get around the fact that Jesus likens this woman and her daughter to dogs. But this Canaanite woman, she is one feisty gal. She has every reason to be offended by his response, but her focus is on her daughter. She is persistent and she won't take no for an answer, she wrestles and will not turn loose until Jesus blesses her, she retorts and she even gets Jesus on his own metaphor yes Lord but even the little dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs. She bests him and Jesus comments on her faith, not a faith that is easy and light but a faith that is tenacious and obstinate and the demon leaves her daughter.

Now this is the point in this text where I usually talk about how this woman opens Jesus to the breadth of his mission and to the wideness of God's love. How she helps him to see that the good news he is called to share is truly for everyone and the love he is called to extend is radically inclusive, but today I want to go back, I want to go back to that slur, to Jesus initial response to this woman. Because you know how he responds, it resonates with me, resonates with how I get road rage especially with all the construction on Jasper Ave right now. It resonates with how irate I get when I see people not wearing masks inside public spaces. It resonates with how just seeing a photo of the Education Minister when scrolling through Facebook makes me so enraged. It's so easy to go against our values in times such as these, in times that are filled with tension and distrust and uncertainty and fear. So, I want to go back, and I want to really examine

Jesus' response here. Are there ways around the awfulness of this encounter? Maybe Jesus is tired, maybe he wants a break from the relentless demands of his ministry. Maybe, as Sharon Ringe suggests, Jesus was caught with his compassion down; maybe he's fed up with people begging him for gifts favors miracles. Maybe he's simply describing the reality of his mission as he sees it; the healing he offers is for the children of Israel first. Maybe his ethnic slur is just a test, a deliberate provocation to prove the woman's devotion. These are all possibilities, but I don't think they do justice to the power of this story. What makes sense to me as suggested by Debbie Thomas is that the Jesus, we encounter in this moment is so fully human. He's a product of his time and place shaped as we all are by the conscious and unconscious biases, prejudices, and entitlements of his culture.

I've been reading Glennon Doyle's new book 'Untamed' and just yesterday I came across this line which is just stuck with me, 'we are mugs filled to the brim and we keep getting bumped. If we're filled with coffee, coffee will spill out. If we are filled with tea, tea will spill out. Getting bumped is inevitable. If we want to change what spills out, we have to work to change what's inside of us.' She uses this image as she's talking about racism and the racism that we all have inside of us. When we get bumped racism spills out because we are filled with it. That is what happens according to Doyle if we argue that Jesus was fully human, shaped by his time and place and thus filled with the biases and prejudices of his culture it's understandable that when he gets bumped encounters like this spill out; especially when he's also being filled with stress and the fatigue of living in and ministering within Roman occupied Judea. And this brings me back to the first part of the scripture that we looked at today, the idea that what comes out defiles us or reveals our hearts. It reveals what our hearts are filled with. Whatever is in the Cup is what will spill out. It's easy for me to fake it until I get rattled. When life gets tough what spills out joy, gratefulness, peace, humility; or does fear, anger, hatefulness, distrust, harsh words, the ingrained biases of my culture. My innate sense of superiority. Jesus was challenged by this woman. Now we don't know exactly what happened in his mind, but it's clear that his mind was changed. It's clear that he was changed and it's clear that the scope of his ministry was changed. It became the boundary crossing ministry which has drawn us in and then sends so many of us out to continue the widening of the circle. It is a hard time to live into that circle widening, boundary erasing mission we are called to. Many of us don't feel that we can safely go to Camp Pekewewan in downtown Edmonton and call upon the city to change how it responds to the homeless and indigenous communities in our midst. And it's a difficult time to join and march for safe school openings. We need distance and we need our boundaries to keep our communities safe.

But what I can take from scripture today is that we can fill ourselves up with goodness We can expand our reading list and our social media feeds and fill our hearts and minds with voices from beyond our bubbles. We can reach out through technology and fill our hearts with voices of loved ones who remind us that we are cherished. We can fill ourselves up with goodness so that

when we are bumped when we're cut off in traffic when we see the person not wearing a mask what spills out is joy, forgiveness, words of affirmation, kindness, gentleness, love of others, love of the other. And what we can learn from Jesus is that when something other than that goodness spills out, we can learn, we can grow, we can allow others to challenge us and to change us. We can humble ourselves long enough to learn what only a vulnerable outsider can teach us right now we're living through times so fraught and tenuous it's so easy to get overwhelmed let us remember to fill ourselves up with goodness let us choose love and kindness and let us remember what Jesus teaches us here that compassion can be cultivated and we can grow into more inclusive love. Thanks be to God. Amen.