

## **“Lord, help me”**

Sunday, August 16, 2020

Matthew 15: 10-20, 21-28

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Christopher W. Keating

Woodlawn Chapel Presbyterian Church

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Many of our college students at Woodlawn Chapel have begun moving back to school, and a fair number are headed off to college for the first time this weekend.

You think you are ready for this moment: having planned for it, saved for it. You think you are ready, having packed up the car, loading the minifridge and microwave, bins of clothes and memories of home. And then after hauling all of this across parking lots and up unairconditioned flights of dorm stairs, the moment comes. You look at your child and you wonder if you’ve given them all that they need, if you have taught them all that they need to know.

You’ve given them all the talks, the lectures. You’ve shown them how to hook up jumper cables and told them their debit card is not an unlimited source of funds. You’ve even been kind enough to show them the library and laundry room.

And as their new friends stand around them, our sons and daughters look at us and say, “Um, can we keep this moving along?”

If only they knew, we think. But here at this borderlands between youth and adulthood we suddenly realize that neither of us know what’s ahead. As you hug goodbye there comes the realization that it is only by acknowledged what we do not know that we can move forward. This is a moment, says consultant Larry Dressler, of realizing that there is great power in remembering what we do not know. He says it is almost always what we think we know that lands us in the most trouble.

There is great power in remembering that what we do not know.

I was thinking about that yesterday as we helped our daughter set up her classroom at the school where she teaches. Her third graders won't be filing in the front door of the school, but they will be ready to learn. Watching her colleagues and administrators put the finishing touches on their preparations, I realized that what makes this year particularly anxious for parents, teachers, students, is the knowledge of what we do not know.

We do not know how all of this is going to work out. We do not have all the answers to the questions that are popping around in our minds. We do not know when these precautions will no longer be necessary. We are standing in a strange place at a strange time – a place that might well be called a border between all that we've known and all that we have yet to learn.

We stand with one foot planted in familiar surroundings while the other takes tentative steps into the future. We are aware that we do not know everything.

Jesus stands in such a place today. He has crossed into an unknown "in between" place on the border between Galilee and the primarily Gentile territories near Tyre and Sidon. Nothing in this place is familiar. Matthew reminds us that Jesus is not Galilee any longer. Having just gone toe to toe with the Pharisees in verses 10-20, Jesus now finds himself in a place where those laws have no standing. It is a place long considered diabolical and wicked. This is no place for a good Jewish boy from Galilee.

There are no crowds clamoring after him, but there is a woman. She's unnamed, but has apparently heard about Jesus' reputation. Defying long-standing cultural, religious, and social boundaries, she steps out of the shadows and dares to call after Jesus. She is a Gentile, but not just a Gentile; she is a Canaanite, part of a people long disparaged by Jews. Not only is she a Gentile, a Canaanite, but she is also, obviously, a woman who is long accustomed to being ignored.

She has heard about this man Jesus. Perhaps she knows that the blood of her ancestors Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth also courses through his veins. Perhaps she has heard of his compassion and his ability to heal. Who knows what she knows? We only know that deep within her is a longing for her daughter to be made well - the one thing for which all parents yearn.

So she shouts. She clamors after Jesus, tracking him down, relentless in her cries.

Yet Jesus ignores her. Her clamoring is getting embarrassing, and the disciples intervene. Send her away! Tell her to get lost! Their prejudice is showing, and frankly, so is Jesus'. He refuses to pay her any attention.

Yet this woman is stubborn. She will not be told to shut up. She is persistent, impolite, single-minded, and thoroughly committed to doing anything that could help her daughter. Tom Long notes that there is a quality about the woman's cries that echo the lament of Psalm 22: "O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer." (Long, "Matthew," p. 175).

But Jesus did not respond.

As her cries become louder, he finally turns to her and reminds her that his mission is only to offer food to the children of Israel.

She responds, "Lord, help me."

It is a cry of deep desperation, a cry to be noticed. It is also a cry of faith from a woman exhausted by always being pushed away.

For whatever reason – maybe he was tired, maybe he was trying to be sarcastic, maybe he was overcome by human weakness – for whatever reason, Jesus rebukes the woman by using a hateful racial slur designed to keep her in her place. "The dogs do not deserve the children's bread," he tells her.

There's no getting around the harshness of his tone. The food he brings is intended only for the children of Israel, and not for "little dogs."

It is a hurtful, damaging invective. Jesus' response is troubling, a reminder that this woman remains an outsider. She was neither the first nor the last woman to be subjected to name calling by a man—but somehow we cannot wrap our minds around the idea that Jesus would use this sort of language. Jesus' response is troubling, and is a reminder that she remains an outsider.

But she is also a *determined* outsider. Her voice will not go unheard. Without denying the priority of Israel, she insists that even Gentiles deserve to be fed. She presses forward for a place at the table, and her faith is rewarded

because she understands what it means to call Jesus Lord. Instead of shrinking back, she pushes forward—and reminds Jesus that in her country, even the dogs lick up the scraps which fall from the table.

She is an outsider, saved by her faith in Jesus Christ.

As I try to make sense of this story, I have begun to see the woman as a teacher. She is teaching Jesus, and I think she is also teaching us. She teaches Jesus to remember the words he has spoken to the Pharisees that it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles, but what comes out. She teaches Jesus that she, a Canaanite woman, can also discover Israel's Messiah—and that she, too, is welcomed by God.

If we are listening, the woman might become our teacher this morning. She might challenge us to rethink the biases we have allowed to take root in our lives. She would cause us to rethink what it means to share the bounty of God's mercy. She would teach us what it means to have a deep faith that takes risks and remembers that we are not abandoned.

This morning, as we stand in the border lands of the pandemic, we need her to become our teacher, to teach us what we do not know.

We need her to teach us to listen for the desperate cries of parents whose children – whose babies – have died on the streets of St. Louis this summer. Do you hear their cries? They are crying "Help me!" Do we hear those who are struggling with feeling overwhelmed by the pandemic? Or those who have lost jobs, who have unrelenting physical pain? Who are alone? Do we hear those persistent cries of "Help me!"

Three of us from Woodlawn drove to Sunshine Ministries in North St. Louis this week. We delivered the clothing, personal items and household goods you so generously shared. Each day their staff is listening for the cries of homeless men, and low-income women and children. Their voices call across the borders, pleading for God, trusting in God's ability to save. It is a beautiful, hope-filled place of faith.

Go to the borderlands today. Go, and listen for the cries of those longing for God. Go within yourself and discover the sort of faith that is willing to reach

forward against all obstacles. Go, and reach forward the God who is inviting all people to find hope and healing. Amen.