

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

August 16, 2020 (Proper 15, Year A)
Matthew 15:10-28

The administrator at a large mental-health clinic once described what he called the BYMF factor. A BYMF is a Beautiful Young Male or Female. He noted that whenever an attractive-looking young adult entered the clinic, the receptionist immediately gave that person attention and was more detailed in giving directions. And then the INTAKE person also tended to see the attractive young adult more promptly, and appeared to take more time in matching them up with a counselor. But elderly people, and people who WEREN'T attractive, and people who were obviously poor, or were a minority got considerably LESS attention, were more likely to wait longer at the receptionist's desk, had a more unthinking intake interview, and often had to wait longer to get an appointment with a counselor. And all of this happened in a place where people were committed to accepting EVERYONE impartially and unconditionally. And if you asked them, they'd swear up and down that everyone GOT equal treatment regardless of race, creed, color, class, gender or age. But they did NOT.

And if you have ever BEEN of the wrong race, color, class, gender or age, you know that you do get treated differently, and you're IGNORED more than people who are younger, whiter, wealthier, have straighter teeth, or are male.

I'd like to show you something.

Show video "Little Girl Was Treated Differently Based On Looks"

Whether we want to admit it or not, it seems to be human nature to prefer some people over others. It's just another aspect of our age-old bondage to sin. But today's readings call us to challenge that pattern, to THINK about how we treat people on the margins, people on the fringes, the outsiders.

That's what our GOSPEL is about today. We have here a GENTILE, and not just ANY gentile – a CANAANITE, an ENEMY of Israel, AND she's a WOMAN. How DARE she approach a RABBI!

The disciples URGE Jesus to get RID of her. They're like the Secret Service here, protecting Jesus from any unwanted intrusion. But she's determined TO INTRUDE. Her daughter is ill, and she won't take "no" for an answer. Jesus seems to AGREE with the disciples and brushes her off with the little slogan about not giving the children's bread to DOGS ("dogs" being a favorite insult of the day for Gentiles like her). A DOG! Ouch!

But she CHALLENGED Jesus. "But even the dogs can eat the crumbs from under the Master's table. That's all I'm asking." And Jesus seems utterly amazed by her persistence. Remember, she's a WOMAN who dares to argue points of theology with a RABBI. She's also a GENTILE who should know NOTHING ABOUT theology.

And you know, this is the only time in the New Testament where Jesus accepts an open challenge from someone. Because she really GETS to Jesus. He may have thought he believed all this nonsense about the Messiah being ONLY for the lost sheep of Israel, but why did he keep GOING to gentile territory? He'd walked a 100 miles to get to THIS woman, outside Israel. She REMINDS him what his heart and soul were ALREADY telling him. He shouts in amazement, "Great is your faith!"

Which is all the more amazing because just a few verses before, Jesus had been marveling at the LACK of faith and understanding by his disciples. Her faith is a huge contrast to the LACK of faith of Jesus' own INNER CIRCLE.

So the contrast seems to say that the disciples, and we, the church, don't GET it. It's what's in the HEART that matters, NOT outward appearances. But this outsider, this foreigner, THIS is the one who understands. The grace of God won't be limited by OUR boundaries of who is deserving and who is undeserving, who's on the inside and who's on the outside.

He said, "Woman, great is your faith!" The only person in the entire New Testament that he EVER says that to. "Great is your faith." No DISCIPLE gets that commendation; this FOREIGNER gets that commendation. "Great is your faith." And her daughter is healed.

And once again, having been REMINDED who he REALLY is, Jesus demonstrates his overflowing compassion. His love and healing power aren't just for the "insiders," His mercy isn't just for the ones who FOLLOW him, his disciples, US, the CHURCH. His healing power overflows, OVERFLOWS even to this outsider, this woman, this Gentile.

And so this startling event BECOMES a PARABLE about the compassion of Jesus reaching out beyond our boundaries. But it's also a parable about the way that we, the church, the insiders, REACT when Jesus' good news is ALSO good news for somebody ELSE, the OUTSIDERS. It may be only human to want Jesus to be just OUR friend, and nobody ELSE'S.

I remember some years ago, when my wife and I visited a church of a different denomination on a vacation. The people seemed friendly and appeared happy to have us there, but the service itself was another story. I was a visitor and I didn't know my way around their hymn book and liturgy and NO one offered to help me. Everybody ELSE knew what to do and when, but by the time I got to the right page, they were already finished. Their bulletin wasn't much help either. And I'm a PASTOR for Peter's sake. When THEIR worship was over (and I do mean "their" worship), I felt like I hadn't worshipped at all. It was all about what was familiar to THEM. I'm sure THEY felt like they were a warm and friendly church, but I just felt like an OUTSIDER.

I heard a joke recently about the difference between how we see OURSELVES and how OTHERS see us. The choir director at a church came to the pastor for help. It seemed one of the members of the choir couldn't hold a tune, and was always off-key. The director had gotten several complaints. Well the pastor wanted to be gentle and diplomatic about the whole thing, so he quietly took the man aside one day and said, "You know, I think your gifts might be better used in another area. We've gotten a few complaints about your singing." The man replied, "That's okay pastor, I've heard at about 50 complaints about your preaching." You see, there's a DIFFERENCE between how we see OURSELVES and how OTHERS see us.

Anyway, that day at that church, I committed to make church accessible to EVERYONE. God's house is supposed to be a house of prayer for ALL people. NO ONE should EVER feel like an outsider in CHURCH.

And I think you can see it in the way we do things here. I try my best to make our service and our bulletin easy to follow, so that ANYBODY coming here, even if they have NEVER been to church, should be able to move their way through the service. We try to give as clear directions as possible about what to do for our offering and communion. And everybody is included. And for those who can't come to church, even before Covid-19, we have the livestream and the radio broadcast. We are just beginning to be allowed to BRING COMMUNION to our people in nursing homes again. And we bring communion OUT to our shut-ins. We DO that, because EVERYONE is included, NO EXCEPTIONS. EVERYONE IS WELCOME.

These readings call us to think about the outsiders and the foreigners. We've come a long way in making OURSELVES more open, but we STILL have a long way to go. This is an attitude that is counter-cultural right now, it's sometimes even controversial, but it's who we ARE in the ELCA. Because we believe this is who CHRIST WANTS us to be. We are called to welcome OTHERS the way GOD welcomes US, with open arms! NO ONE should feel like an outsider. EVERYONE is welcome. EVEN ME. And even YOU. Amen.