

Moving Fences
Matthew 15:21-28
September 18, 2005

Once there was a woman who lived in a little central European village. She was a nurse and had devoted her good life to caring for her neighbors. She was there for them at birth and at death; she bound up their scratches, their bruises, their broken bones, and she sat through interminable nights with those who were seriously ill.

In the course of time she died. She had no family in the village so the villagers decided to hold a very lovely funeral for her. But the village priest had to remind them that she could not be buried in the town cemetery, for the village was Roman Catholic and she had been a Protestant. The villagers protested, but the priest held firm. It was not easy for him because she had nursed him as well. Nevertheless, the canons of the church were very clear; she would have to be buried outside the fence.

The day of the funeral arrived, and the entire village accompanied her casket to the cemetery, where she was buried—outside the fence. And then that night, after dark, villagers returned to the cemetery and deliberately, with heart, moved the fence!

This morning's story about the Canaanite woman reminded me of the villagers who moved the fence. In Jesus' day there were similar dividing lines between Jews and Gentiles. They were not friendly with one another; in fact, there was a good deal of animosity between the races. Religious and social customs prohibited Jews and Gentiles from mingling with one another. This hostility had been solidified over the years in tradition and law.

Jesus was a Jew, steeped in the law and tradition of his people. One of the Jewish beliefs was that God's plan was to offer salvation solely to the Jews. This was a very parochial perspective, one which we don't necessarily associate with Jesus. Our image of Jesus is one of inclusion, of acceptance of everybody. But this story indicates that there may have been a time in Jesus' life when he held a narrow, exclusionary bias against the Gentiles. In this situation he does not appear as an advocate for the disenfranchised or outcasts or marginalized. He acted as his tradition had taught him.

We see this in Jesus' response to the woman. The Canaanite woman's first word to Jesus was a request for help for her daughter who was tormented by a demon. Jesus was silent. He didn't speak to her. He

didn't even acknowledge her presence. Imagine what it felt like to be ignored, to be treated with indifference. Then the disciples urged Jesus to send her away because she was bothering them. Jesus responded with an outright refusal to help. He said that his mission was only to the Israelites. The Canaanite woman was obviously excluded from his ministry.

The woman was persistent. She said, "Lord, help me." That time Jesus replied with a harsh insult, a racial slur. He referred to Gentiles as "dogs." He said, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." The woman was quick and creative with her retort, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." She was prepared to beg like a little dog from under the master's table if that's what it took to get Jesus' help. Her persistent faith surprised Jesus and finally she received his blessing, "Woman, great is your faith!" And her daughter was healed.

With her persistent faith, the Canaanite woman confronted Jesus' narrow perspective and converted him. She changed Jesus' mind. She gave him a new insight into himself, an extension of his mission and identity, a connection to another world. He was willing to concede that there was room in God's kingdom for all. Jesus' action at the end was contrary to Jewish tradition and law which had been operative for centuries. He had moved the fence to include Gentiles as well as Jews.

Matthew wrote his gospel nearly 60 years after Jesus' death, near the end of the first century, around the year 90 CE (Common Era). The story was told in the oral tradition for many years before it was written. We know how stories are often changed in the telling as time goes on. It is possible that the story did not truly happen as Matthew reports, but the story had an important message for Matthew and his community, so he included it in his gospel.

Matthew's Christian community was predominately Jewish, but they felt persecuted by the Jewish leadership. Matthew may have been trying to teach his community to reconsider the tradition and law, which had been such a significant part of their lives. Human theology is not cast in concrete. It can change and should evolve as new understandings are received. Jesus had broadened their perspective. They needed to revise their thinking and beliefs in light of their new learnings. Matthew may have used this story as a challenge to move beyond the Jewish-Gentile animosity and to extend mission and ministry to anyone, whether Jew or Gentile.

Matthew challenged his church to hear a new word from God, to repent of sinful actions, and to be converted to new ways of relating. He

urged them to move the fence, cross the border, to venture into unfamiliar and strange land with faith that God was there also. The border need not be simply the boundary into alien territory; it can also be the frontier into new adventures. Instead of denying access, the fence can be moved to provide an opportunity to relate to people we have never before encountered.

We've heard the story itself and we've heard what it meant for Matthew's church. What is the message for us today? The story of the Canaanite woman calls us to consider how we relate to people who are different from us, whether in gender, race, nationality, economic status, sexual orientation, language or any number of things that tend to divide us. With these categories we build fences that separate us. We alienate ourselves from our fellow human beings. We label some – usually ourselves – as superior and “the others” as inferior. Many political issues in our day are rooted in this kind of mentality: immigration, same-sex marriage, affirmative action, racism, sexism. Those who are different from us often threaten us. We are fearful because we do not know them. In order to protect our own identity, we put them down. As Jesus initially responded to the Canaanite woman, we are often silent and indifferent. Sometimes we outright reject them and even write laws to exclude them, to make them “outsiders,” to legitimize the superior status of some and the inferiority of “others.” We treat each other cruelly and inhumanely.

The Canaanite woman challenges us to examine our biases and our behavior. She calls us to look inside our souls at our own identity, to consider how we view others and ourselves.

For many people the need for superiority or supremacy is rooted in the fact that we have a difficult time accepting and loving ourselves. We resist claiming our identity as children of God because we know our faults and know that God couldn't possibly love us. Because we can't love ourselves, neither can we love other people. We tear others down the way we internally tear down ourselves. No one is good enough for God's love, nor for human acceptance.

The good news of Jesus is that we are children of God. That is our identity. We are accepted and loved just as we are. It's not something we have to earn, it's simply a gift we need to receive. Once we receive that gift, there is no need to be threatened by anyone else. In fact, we recognize that everyone is a child of God. We are all on the same playing field. We are all loved and created by our Creator, no matter our gender, age, sex, race, sexual orientation, hair color, weight, height. All of us are children of God. No one is superior, no one is inferior.

A key to breaking the barrier is being present to one another. The encounter between the Canaanite woman and Jesus was brief, but they did spend some time together. In that period of time, Jesus came to see the woman in a new light. She was not just a pesty mother desperately seeking any means of healing her daughter. She was a woman of great faith. When we spend time with folks who differ from us, we often discover that we have more in common than we thought. The differences no longer loom so large; in fact, they often fade into the background.

In my life I have been grateful for the presence of people of color, people of other faiths, gays and lesbians who have invited me into their lives. Those friendships healed some of the phobias that haunted me. They have led me to move some fences and embrace people who differ from me.

Our country is at a critical moment in time. The devastation done by the hurricane and floods on the Gulf Coast has uncovered deep racism and classism that exist in our country. It creates an opportunity for each of us to examine our own conscience and the stereotypes that keep us distanced from others. I know that I still have some fences to move when it comes to racism.

At the Lamorinda interfaith gathering of congregational leaders last week, Rev. Faye Orton-Matthews, of Lafayette Christian Church, wondered out loud about Lamorinda residents adopting East Oakland, not in a patronizing way, but in a way to develop relationships so that when the next earthquake strikes, what happened in New Orleans does not happen here. In Oakland 19.4% of the population and 16.2% of families live below the poverty line. Out of the total population, 27.9% of those under the age of 18 and 13.1% of those 65 and older are living below the poverty line. What if we adopted a United Methodist congregation in Oakland, built relationships, worked together in our communities, and equipped them with earthquake kits so that they will be somewhat prepared when disaster strikes here. In our busy lives, it would be a major commitment, but what a model of moving fences it would be for this community and for our country.

Another interfaith colleague in Orinda sends us *The Christian Science Monitor*. Friday's issue held a wonderful story of bridge building across cultures through music. Life in Haiti has become increasingly tense in recent months. The capital, Port-au-Prince, has suffering an increase in kidnappings, carjackings, and murders – mostly targeting foreigners. Now virtually the only foreigners entering the Caribbean nation are UN peacekeepers.

Yet in August, musicians from Austria's Arpeggione Orchestra and the US Symphony of the Americas (SOA) flew from Florida to Cap-Haitien

for a weeklong tour. They played in venues ranging from movie theaters to a small concrete church. The tour was not without its challenges, including rough roads that posed threats to delicate instruments and patchy phone connections. Musicians were stunned by the extreme poverty. In spite of the obstacles, both parties agreed that the trip was successful in building bridges. Haitians were introduced to classical music, most for the first time. Members of the orchestra ended one concert by planting tress to the beat of voodoo drums! Both sides took a risk, opened the gate to meet the outsider. Each was pleasantly surprised by the delightful experience which built bridges in a country that has been shunned by the world.¹

Every human being is a child of God. Like Jesus, we are called to cross the border, to enter into another's territory, to dialogue and be present. We are called to move the fence and embrace people who differ from us in some ways, but who, in the core of their being, are also children of God.

May God grant us the courage and the compassion to repent and to change our ways as Jesus did.

¹ Amy Bracken, “As many flee Haiti, an orchestra’s tour brings balm,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, September 16, 2005, pp. 1, 4.

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