

Outsiders
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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SEVENTH HEAVEN

I'm a fan of that TV show, Seventh Heaven. For those of you who haven't watched it, it's the story of the trials and tribulations of a minister's family. Anyway, in the latest edition, the minister's son has married a rabbi's daughter and is even considering converting to Judaism.

This information accidentally slipped out as the families met for the first time over the dinner table. The pastor who considers himself to be open minded is overwhelmed by this news. He can't believe that his son would betray the faith that he had been taught for twenty one years.

The rabbi has great sympathy for the pastor's feeling. Indeed, as they talk in his study together alone after the meal, he shares with the pastor that he too had been quite upset when he learned that his daughter might marry a Christian. He even had the smashed ping pong balls and broken ping pong paddle to prove it.

The implication of the show was that the two men began to recognize a common faith in each other even though they had quite different backgrounds and beliefs on some issues. The minister even attended a temple service and said a few words as a sign of his good will.

But, of course TV always makes it seem too neat and simple. (My children tell me that their friends always ask if our family life is like that portrayed by the family on Seventh Heaven, and they assure them that our family life is a bit more how shall I put it "interesting.")
Life and faith are always a struggle.

THE OUTSIDER

And this is often particularly so when we encounter someone who is beyond the boundary of what we find comfortable and acceptable.
Encounters with those outside our faith boundaries are not always easy.

Indeed, the usual way of dealing with outsiders is to ignore them and hope they'll go away. And that's exactly how Jesus and his disciples attempt to deal with a person who is outside their faith boundaries in our lesson for today.

It seems that Jesus and his band have made it to the border of the kosher world the district of Tyre and Sidon. And there on the border of their world, they are accosted by a woman who is definitely not from their land. She is a Canaanite.

The Canaanites were a pagan people who had fought with God's people ever since they entered the promised land.. She was because she was a Canaanite, a person of suspect theology and morality. She was in the estimation of any pious Jew not a part of God's chosen people.

She was most definitely an outsider.

TRYING TO IGNORE THE SHOUTS OF THE OUTSIDER

As it is in our day, the accepted procedure in Jesus' day was to ignore such people.

And Jesus and his disciples would have done just that except that this woman will not be ignored. She is shouting.

She shouts,

"Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David;
my daughter is tormented by a demon." Matthew 15:22

The Greek word that we translate "shout" (krazo) was originally used to describe the unpleasant sound of a raven. Have you ever been accosted by someone who's raspy voice you would rather not acknowledge. I have.

You're walking down the street minding your own business and someone starts screeching at you like a raven.

"Excuse me sir. Excuse me.
Can I talk to you for just a minute?"

You already know what this is all about.

You look away ... pretending not to see,
but the battle hardened veteran of the street is not about to take no for an answer.

He pursues you down the block demanding that you acknowledge his presence. Finally, he gets up in your face, and you get a whiff of alcohol as he asks again,

"Hey mister. Have you got some spare change?"

Just ask the folks in Orlando.

That kind of thing is disconcerting. It's bad for business.

You have to set boundaries for people like that
.... little blue boxes in which they can stand.

I understand.

Encounters with those on the boundaries of life are disconcerting.

They often seem dangerous to those of us who come from a different land.

A little bit of caution is a good thing especially when it comes to outsiders.

TRYING TO MAINTAIN THE BOUNDARY

And Jesus seems to have understood this as well. Like us, he just kept walking. In those days men didn't talk with women in public much less foreign women. Just wasn't done.

There are some people who will always be outsiders when it comes to our life. They always will be. Best just to keep quiet. Talking only encourages them.

Boundaries need to be maintained.

But, the disciples were not content with such a passive response to the

problem. After all this screeching woman was causing trouble. What would people think what with this woman tagging along behind them?

So the disciples go to Jesus and ask him to put a stop to this nonsense.
"Send her away, Jesus."

Again, I can understand the concern of the disciples. People will take advantage if you let them. I know. The world is full of needy people. You have make sure that boundaries are not crossed. There are only so many people you can help. There comes a time when you have to take care of yourself.

The whining cry of needy people can drag you done ... especially those "outsiders" with whom we have nothing in common. When you're a minister it's best to save your energy for those who are a part of your flock. Your whole day could be monopolized by the con artists who come to your door.

And, surprise, surprise once again Jesus seems to agree with that assessment. In response to the disciples' plea to send this screeching woman away,
Jesus stops and says to this poor, desperate soul,

"Look. In case you haven't noticed.
I'm a Jewish Messiah.
I was sent to only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.
Sorry. You don't qualify."

In other words, it would be like me responding to some outsider asking for help by saying, "Excuse me. I'm a Presbyterian minister. I minister to the Presbyterians? Are you Presbyterian? Okay. If you are, spell it. Didn't think so. Best you move on down the street."

That seems harsh doesn't it?

This is certainly Jesus as we've never seen him before.
Why is he acting like this?
Didn't Jesus often get into trouble because he was too accepting of outsiders and not concerned enough about the religious traditions of his people?

Why doesn't he show compassion toward this woman?

But, the worst is yet to come.

The woman is not put off by Jesus' statement.
Instead, she rushes over and kneels at Jesus' feet.
And at his feet she cries,
"Lord, help me!"

Surely now Jesus will show compassion. But, no.
It doesn't happen that way. Instead, Jesus replies,
"It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

DOGS?

Commentators have tried their best down through the ages to lessen the harsh

nature of this saying. Some suggest that Jesus is not calling her a street dog but a cute little puppy! Not likely.

Some suggest that Jesus never said this at all ... that this is just a story made up by Matthew's community to describe how Gentiles were eventually allowed into the church.

And still others suggest that since Jesus is human as well as divine, this is just his humanity coming to the fore. Jesus just made a mistake on this occasion. We all have bad days. Even Jesus was blinded as to the depth and breadth of God's compassion and salvation.

I'm not so sure any of those explanations help me with this passage. Nor, do I think those explanations are necessary.

THE CONTEXT

In order to understand this passage, we need to read it in light of its context. The passages which precede this story are about Jesus having one hostile encounter after another with the religious leaders, the insiders of the faith.

In particular, the Pharisees had taken issue with Jesus because his disciples didn't observe the practice of ritual hand washing. Jesus then pointed out to the Pharisees that true purity was not a ritual to be observed but obedience to God's law.

And then in a very scathing criticism Jesus pointed out how these religious insiders had actually broken God's commandment with their legal technicalities. One of the ten commandments was to honor your father and mother. And one implication of that commandment was acknowledged to be to take care of your parents all their life.

But, instead of doing that, some of these leaders in an attempt to preserve their financial resources had said, "Okay, what I have is dedicated to God. Therefore, my parents can't have it."

Now understand. This didn't mean that the leaders actually gave what they had to the Lord. They just "dedicated" it to God so that their parents weren't entitled to anything.

(By the way, don't be too harsh toward the religious leaders of Jesus' day. How many times have people today done harsh things in the name of faith for financial advantage? Too often I'm afraid.)

But, Jesus would not let them (or us) get away with such deceptive behavior.

CORRECTED BY THE FAITH OF AN OUTSIDER

Jesus loves us too much to let us remain in our sin. He points us to a higher way, and often it is the story of an outsider who has shown surprising faith that illustrates that higher way.

This is a recurring theme in all the gospels. Those who should have recognized Jesus and displayed true faith turn out to be blind and even hostile to the message.

But, this lack of understanding is often immediately followed by the story of an outsider showing insight and great faith. So it is in this case.

The religious leaders don't have a clue. But, when Jesus leaves these insiders and goes to the land that is supposedly devoid of all morality and knowledge of God, Jesus finds great faith. The Canaanite woman has great insight. She refers to Jesus as "Lord, Son of David." She's the one who knows that he is the Messiah and refuses to give up hope even in the face of rejection.

Jesus said that it was not fair to take the children's food and give it to the dogs, but the Canaanite woman responded, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

[28] Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly. Matthew 15:28 (NRSV)

Great faith and a miracle in a land thought to be beyond faith.

THE OUTSIDER THEME IN MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

In a way this is a subplot that runs throughout the gospel of Matthew. Gentiles, those outside the chosen people of God keep appearing at key points. For example, some of the first ones to know that something special is happening with the birth of Jesus are not God's people but strangers who live far from the promised land.

It is the Gentile stargazers, the magi who see the star and come to worship the infant Jesus. And now, in the same way, it is a woman from a pagan land who shows great faith.

She dares to argue points of theology with a Jewish rabbi ... even though she should know nothing of theology. And though Jesus could do few miracles in his home town because of his people's lack of faith, in this case a miracle of healing occurs.

Indeed, more than that, this one act of faith seems to open up the possibility for more ministry in Gentile territory.

In the passages of Scripture that follows this, Jesus is once again portrayed as a great healer. The mute speak. The blind see, and the lame walk. These are all signs that pointed to the coming of the Messiah.

There is even a second feeding miracle that seems to be a repeat of the passage which we studied just a few weeks ago. Except in this case four thousand are fed instead of five thousand. What is the meaning of these extra miracles? Why are they recorded? I think the key is found in Matthew 15:31.

In response to the miracles, the crowd is amazed and the Scripture says, " And they praised the God of Israel." Matthew 15:31 (NRSV)

That phrase suggest to me that the crowd is made up primarily of Gentiles

..... outsiders. Jesus does in Gentile country the same thing that he has done in the promised land. And his ministry in the far land teaches us that the grace of God in Jesus Christ was not and never will be limited by any boundaries.

God's grace in Jesus Christ reaches beyond any boundaries men and woman care to erect, whether they be boundaries of race, religion or even religion.

Indeed, I sometimes think that we are still more likely to find the true meaning of faith in one who is an outsider than in the confines of traditional religion.

THE FAITH OF AN OUTSIDER TODAY

This past week I was reflecting upon the recent rash of child abductions in our country. Like many of you I find them frightening and discouraging at the same time. "What's this world coming to?" That's what I say in response to these terrible atrocities. And what should happen to those who commit such crimes? They should be brought to swift and certain judgment.

But, I heard a different message from some people this past week. People that most of us would consider outsiders. They were obviously born outside the boundaries of our world. To be precise, south of our border in Mexico.

Their last name was Chavez, and they were proud of the fact that they were now citizens of this country, living happily in Abilene, Texas. And they were especially proud of the fact that they had a beautiful baby girl whom they named Nancy.

But, their world was interrupted this week when their child was stolen in broad daylight in a parking lot. Mrs. Chavez strapped her infant in the car carrier and was going around to the other side of the car when a woman snatched her child from the car.

Mrs. Chavez fought valiantly to keep her child even the point of hanging onto the car as it drove away finally falling to the pavement and scraping herself up badly. Of course the media ever happy to whip up hysteria was on the spot to interview this poor woman in her grief. They said that she knew very little English, and they were prepared to interview her through an interpreter.

But, an interpreter wasn't necessary. She said in English. "I am praying for the return of my baby. And I am praying for the one who took my baby. She needs help too."

Strangely enough despite all that she had been through and despite the stress that was on her face there was also a sense of spiritual depth and strength as well.

Gratefully, later that week the baby was found safe and sound. The woman who had taken the baby was arrested, and Mr. and Mr. Chavez were interviewed on Good Morning America. Once again the news anchors tried to elicit a good sound bite. "Mr. Chavez, your wife said before that she was praying for the woman who took your baby. Are you still praying for her?"

"Oh yes. We are praying for her and we forgive her."

“What do you think needs to happen to her for what she did to your family?”

“I think she needs help. Her case needs to be treated with great wisdom so this won’t happen to anyone else again.”

Clearly frustrated with their lack of aggressive comments, the interviewer gives up and says, “Is there anything else either of you would like to say before we close?”

And at that point Mr. Chavez surprised the interviewer with what he said. He replied,

“Yes, there is something I would like to say. America is a great country. Sometimes bad things like this happen. But, many more good things happen than bad.

The people in our country shouldn’t live in fear because sometimes things like this happen. We should be grateful for all the good things we have.”

Wow. Quite a message from someone who was not long ago an outsider. Seems like he and his wife understand our country and our faith better than we do. Despite their struggles and the fear that had recently filled their life, they obviously also knew about God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

And they were able to demonstrate that grace and faith in the most trying of times.

I am happy to come to church and worship God. I know many religious leaders who are very devout and loving people. But, I also know that worship and devotion do not stop at the doors of the church or the borders of our country. The Spirit of God in Christ has a greater witness than we could ever imagine. There are people beyond the borders of our faith who proclaim the gospel of grace in word and deed.

I believe that God is still at work beyond the border. Indeed, I think that there are still people beyond the border who come into our lives. They are different from us in every way. But, through them we often come to understand what it means to be faithful.

I think that is why the task of the church begins with the outsider.

BEGINNING WITH THE OUTSIDER

Last week I told the story of Rick Warren who started a church in Southern California and wondered if God hadn’t made a mistake in sending him there as he experienced his first rush hour traffic jam.

Anyway, someone wanted to know the rest of the story. What happened to that minister, she asked? Well, the short answer is that he became a very successful pastor. He has one of the largest Southern Baptist Churches in that area. But, more important is how he did it.

Rick said that he wanted to build a church for outsiders for those who had never gone to church before. He succeeded. He used a number of techniques to do this ... chief of them was listening to the concerns of the outsiders and trying to help them with those concerns.

I think he was successful because the power of the gospel is often seen most clearly when outsiders are welcomed to the fellowship. Indeed, we find that the outsiders often show more faith than the insiders just as it was in Jesus' day. It is the outsider who enlivens the community of faith and points them toward areas of greater grace and growth.

Are you an insider a long time member of the faith?

Rejoice and give thanks for the salvation and grace that has been yours from the very beginning. But, also be ready to welcome outsiders ... those who are new to the faith. Because sometimes it is the outsider who understands the gospel most clearly.

Are you an outsider not sure that you have faith and yet wondering if the grace of God in Jesus Christ might be for you?

You have reason to rejoice and give thanks as well. Because you are not at a disadvantage. None of us have a theology that is right enough or a life that is good enough to come to God on our own.

But, Jesus travels to us.
Jesus crosses the boundary into our lives and brings us hope.

Your call for salvation will not go unheeded because God in Christ has shown Himself to be a God for the outsider as well as the insider. You too can have faith. You too can know the salvation of God in Jesus Christ.

In fact, just as it happened long ago, the faith of an outsider can change everything.

Amen.