

SERMON

Pastor James Bauman
Immanuel Lutheran Church, Bartlett, Illinois
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Isaiah 56:1, 6-8 Romans 11:1-2a, 13-15, 28-32 Matthew 15:21-28

How do we view others?

How easily do we discount them?

Matthew's Gospel begins with the visit

- of the very different Magi to the infant Jesus--
- representatives of the Gentile world.

The Gospel concludes with the Great commission to the apostles

- to go and teach ALL nations.

Today's Gospel gives us a glimpse

- of what would be possible in the future--
- as the Good News would break down
- traditional boundaries and walls between people.
- All people would enjoy a right relationship with God on the same basis,
- by faith alone.

But what can be said about that initial silence of Jesus

- in response to the woman's heartfelt pleas,
- and of Jesus seeming to compare her to a dog?

Several things are important to notice.

First of all, Jesus takes His disciples to this area for a retreat--

- with the purpose of getting away from the constant demands of the crowds-
- to do some serious teaching
- as He prepared His disciples for the difficult days ahead.

The seacoast towns chosen for this retreat

- were about 50 miles from Galilee--
- sort of like going from this area to Wisconsin for a break but walking.

So this woman's appearance demanding the attention of Jesus

- was what they had traveled a long, tiring way on foot to leave behind.

The Lord Jesus was fully human.

- He was truly tired.
- Likely He was also deep in thought.

So the disciples were trying to protect Him from this interruption--

- along with ridding themselves of it as well.

But THIS woman was very insistent,

- DEMANDING to be heard--
- understandably so, for her daughter's sake.

Commentators point out several other significant things.

- In that society it was not usual
- for a rabbi to take time to speak with a woman at all.

- And this aggressive woman was clearly
- of a religion unacceptable to the Jews.
- Jews did regularly refer to Gentiles as “dogs”--
- and also later referred to Gentile Christians in the same way.

But in the original text,

- Jesus does not use the word that is used
- for savage, often diseased street dogs.
- It is the one used for household pets, puppy dogs.
- So He is not speaking harshly.

Also, very importantly, in commentator William Barclay’s words,

“The tone and the look with which a thing is said make all the difference. A thing which seems hard can be said with a disarming smile. We can call a friend “an old villain,” or “a rascal”, with a smile and a tone which take all the sting out of it and fill it with affection. We can be quite sure that the smile on Jesus’ face and the compassion in His eyes robbed the words of all insult and bitterness.”

But, most importantly of all,

- notice the outcome of the Gospel narrative.
- Jesus leads this woman who had nothing to commend her
- to the point of receiving His highest words of praise
- and grants her request to have her daughter healed.

He clearly dealt with her and with her daughter helpfully--

- with care and with grace

- that was larger than anything standing in its way....

How do WE view others?

How easily do WE discount them?

At this time as we hear so much about politics,

- there is also endless talk about “inclusivity”.

The purpose is for political parties’ candidates to receive more votes.

We also hear that the church needs to be more inclusive--

- often especially when the make-up of a neighborhood is changing

- and no longer reflective of the church’s membership.

Often the concern arises because of

- the resulting gloomy financial predictions.

How much more and better reason we have

- to be inclusive in our personal relationships with others--

- in how we view others who may normally be off-putting to us.

As members of the body of Christ in this world,

- we are called to see others with the eyes of Christ.

That means we are also open to responding to their pressing needs--

- even if there is nothing about them

- that would draw us to go out of our way to care....

Already the Old Testament prophet Isaiah had proclaimed,

“Thus says the Lord.... MY house shall be called a house of prayer for ALL peoples.”

Jesus quoted those words

- as He drove the merchants selling animals
- and the money changers
- out of the courts of the Temple in Jerusalem.

That was the area of the Temple grounds where Gentiles were allowed.

Jesus saw that it had been turned into an area

- for merchants loudly dickering with customers about their prices
- and for money-changers to use this holy space for their own gain--
- as they exchanged any coins with Caesar's image on it
- into coins acceptable in the Temple offering container.

In other words, that space was anything but worshipful for non-Jews.

- So by His action our Lord Jesus gave a clear message
- of His concern for all peoples.

In writing to the Romans,

- St. Paul also emphasizes that God's caring mercy is for **all** people.
- We are never to drive someone away from the house of God
- because of our prejudices
- or even because we find them to be troublesome personalities,
- like the woman in today's Gospel.

Some people ARE difficult,

- often for reasons of which we are not aware.

We can be put off by their intrusive or aggressive or rude behavior.

- Or, like the disciples, we can be just too worn out with other concerns
- to respond to their needs.

And some personalities ARE more likeable than others.

- But often it is the most UNlikable who are most in need
- of being received caringly, with grace--
- respected as they are,
- rather than our waiting for them to be changed into something they are not,
- or not yet.

In fact, their easily overlooked needs and the sorry state of their lives,

- may themselves also make them more open than others
- to the caring grace which
- our Lord Jesus would share with them through us.

And, like the Canaanite woman, they may surprise us.

- She did not appear to be qualified to be a believer.
- Not only was she a Gentile; she was bothersome, a pest.

But surprisingly she had amazing faith,

- and unexpectedly turned out to be a great example for others--

- for what faith can do for anyone.

How DO WE view others?

How easily DO WE discount them?

Of course, God also gives us the common sense

- not to put ourselves into unnecessary danger
- or put our own responsibilities into such disarray in order to help others
- that we can no longer be of any help at all to others.

But when and how often do we just use common sense as an excuse

- to do nothing
- except possibly to close our eyes?

Do we view others with the eyes of Christ?

- With respect and care and grace?

Today's Gospel takes on more personal meaning

- when we understand that by nature WE are foreigners
- with no claim at all to any place in the kingdom of God.

The marks of our being foreigners

- are those unwelcome feelings that come over us
- when we cannot seem to connect with God--
- as desperately as we try,
- feeling that He is very distant from us--

- in another world .

Listen to Paul's words to the Romans:

“You Gentiles by birth-- you were foreigners that did not belong to God's chosen people. You had no part in the covenants, which were based on God's promises to His people, and you lived in this world without hope and without God. But now, in union with Christ Jesus YOU, who used to be far away, have been brought near by the sacrificial death of Christ.

“For Christ Himself has brought us peace by making Jews and Gentiles one people. With His own body He broke down the wall that separated them and kept them enemies.

“He abolished the Jewish Law with its commandments and rules, in order to create out of the two races one new people in union with Himself, in this way making peace.... By means of the Cross He united both races into one body and brought them back to God.

“So Christ came and preached the Good News of peace to ALL-- to you Gentiles, who were far away from God, and to the Jews who were near to Him. It is through Christ that ALL of us, Jesus and Gentiles, are able to come in the one Spirit into the presence of the Father.

“So, then, you Gentiles are not foreigners or strangers any longer; you are now fellow citizens with God's people and **MEMBERS OF THE FAMILY OF GOD.**”

And now, like the Canaanite woman,

- we pray with faith-- confident faith.

We pray “in the name of Jesus” and “through Jesus Christ our Lord”.

- And we pray to Jesus, as she did,

- trusting in the mercy that is surely also for us

- by way of that Cross.

How do we view others?

How easily do we discount them?

Those who reach out to others

- with the care and grace of Christ
- because they know the love of Christ is big enough to be for all people receive a rebound-blessing.

They reach out to others

- because they are acting on the understanding
- that Christ's mercy is truly also for those others
- who may seem anything but deserving.

And in reaching out to ALL,

- they are confirmed in the faith
- that Christ's mercy is truly also FOR THEM--
- however far they have wandered,
- into whatever foreign land,
- into whatever has made them unacceptable,
- even the most disgusting things
- that make them seem unacceptable also to themselves.

One final point....

On those days when in answer to our own cries for mercy,

- WE may experience the **silence** of God,

- let's remember the Canaanite woman--
- and her persistence at prayer,
- and the faith which Jesus so highly commended.

Let's allow the silence and the waiting to be a time for growth--

- for our own faith to grow stronger
- as we focus our hope on the One
- who came as Savior of the WHOLE WORLD, including US--
- the One who is the same yesterday, today and forever. Amen.