

Expanding God's Grace

Preached Sunday August 17th, 2014, by Pastor Brahm Semmler Smith

Based on the text from Matthew 15:21-28

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace and peace be with you all this day. Amen.

Have you ever felt uncomfortable? A time in your life when you felt out of place, or really awkward, or when you were just not at ease? A time that really took you out of your comfort zone, so much so, that it was a relief when you were able to get back into what was "normal" for you?

Maybe it was at a party where you didn't know anyone, and you really didn't have the energy to be extroverted that night and meet new people. Or your first visit to a country and culture that was different than the one you grew up with, and the cultural norms were hard to figure out. Or your first visit with your in-laws, or future in-laws, as they were sizing you up, wondering who this person was their beloved youngest child brought home. Or on a blind date that went terribly, horribly wrong. Or the first day on a new job, as you tried to keep your head above water and get the hang of things while surrounded by people who had been working at that job for probably 70 years.

Usually, we feel uncomfortable either when we don't know many of the people around us or when we're not sure of our role, place, or responsibilities. We've all been there – feeling left out, alone, out of our depth, unwelcome. It's a lousy feeling. So lousy, in fact, that we'll go to pretty great lengths to avoid it.

When I lived in Thailand after college, I was an outsider. And it was that year that a number of times, I really felt uncomfortable because of my lack of understanding of the cultural norms, and the fact that I stuck out everywhere I went because I was a large, white foreigner who couldn't speak the language at all. Although the people I met were mostly really, really friendly and curious about me, I could not shake the feeling of being an outsider and the amount of discomfort that came with it. However, I knew that this was only temporary. I could handle it, even embrace it for a few weeks or a year, because I knew I could come home.

But what if this was a more permanent situation? Always feeling like you don't make the cut, are on the outside looking in. When the society that you are in always keeps you on the outside, in the margins; who would rather ignore you, or stare at you, or insult you, rather than deal with you?

In our gospel reading today, we encounter someone who was an extreme outsider for Jesus and his disciples. Jesus and his disciples decided they had to get away from the Pharisees and crowds, and so they travel outside of Galilee and head west, to the cities of Tyre and Sidon. And while there, a Canaanite woman whose daughter has a demon finds him, and she won't go away. She is Canaanite, not a Jew. Which is bad enough. But then her daughter is sick in some way, which to the original hearers of this story meant that obviously someone had done some kind of sinning to deserve such a lot in life. She's living on the outside, and some would like to keep her there. Some, including those very close to Jesus, the disciples.

Which leads us to this fascinating conversation between Jesus and this woman. Fascinating, and also awkward and uncomfortable. The disciples cannot wait to get rid of her. And they try to get Jesus to send her away. But she doesn't give up. She persists, and gets to Jesus' feet, and she begs for him to help her.

And what is Jesus response? "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

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Now, when I first read this, I get this sick feeling in my stomach. If I were sitting there watching this interaction, I don't think I could handle the embarrassment of this woman. Really, Jesus? Really? I am not

sure about you, but this is not what I was expecting from Jesus. I did not expect Jesus to call this woman a dog. This is Jesus, who we expect to tell us things like “blessed are the poor, the meek, the hurting, the mourning.”

Now, I know that many of us love dogs. I love my dog, and I think she is pretty great. But in no way, in no culture I have ever encountered, and definitely not in Jesus’ time, is calling someone a dog a compliment. So much on the margins of Jesus’ and the Jewish people’s concern, she is compared to a dog.

And so, what does she do? She throws Jesus’ comment right back at him. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ tables.” In this response, she places hope in what others throw away and take for granted. She trusts that this Son of David, as she calls him, has enough power that even a crumb of Jesus is enough to defeat the evil that has possessed her daughter.

The interaction between Jesus and this Gentile woman is very important, because we remember that Matthew is the gospel that is obsessed with the Jewish identity of Jesus and Jesus’ followers. In Matthew, we learn that Jesus is the Jewish messiah, the fulfillment of prophecy, righteous according to the law, Moses’ successor, and so on. Jesus is Jewish, only for the Jewish people. But she challenges this mindset, and in doing so, it makes me wonder, does this woman change his mind?

Is that even possible? Is it possible for Jesus to change his mind on something like this? What do you think? I think back to Moses and Abraham, who had to bargain with God a number of times for the sake of others. And yes, it seems like God changes God’s mind. It could be that this woman helps expand Jesus’ boundaries of who is meant for God’s kingdom. Because after hearing her response, he treats her very differently.

In fact, Jesus offers a statement that is just as bold and surprising. “Woman, great is your faith!” Great is your faith he tells this woman who he had just chided. Great is your faith, to a woman of another religion, who was not even of Jesus’ own people. Great is your faith.

It’s a little bit ironic, because in Matthew, Jesus is constantly telling his disciples, you of little faith. But this foreign woman of another religion gets told she has great faith from Jesus. Great is your faith, dear woman, for recognizing that a little bit of God can defeat the greatest evil.

This interaction would have been extremely challenging for those who were surrounding Jesus. Those who were part of the “in” crowd, especially the Jewish people. This interaction expands the notion of who God’s grace is meant for. No one should be on the outside looking in, no matter what society tells us. Which is a message I think we know from Jesus, but is one we need to hear over and over and over again. Especially when looking in the news the past few weeks. When faced with stories about rockets and missiles fired in Gaza and the thousands of civilians killed and injured, to an Ebola outbreak that has the entire continent of Africa fearful of those who are sick, to the racial tensions in St. Louis and other cities in our country, where there is major distrust between racial groups that is a legacy of the complicated and sin filled history of race relations in our country.

This morning, I am left with a few questions from what we learn from this story. How is our idea of who God loves challenged in this story? If we are honest with ourselves, we place limits on our love and on who we think God can love. We hold people at arms length because we would rather not deal with them. Instead, it is much easier to judge others at a distance than from up close. There are people we regard as less than dogs; who we would walk over and around and ignore more so than a sick dog on the street. Who are these people? And how does this woman, and Christ, challenge us to act? And change? Might we be called to enter into awkward and uncomfortable situations, looking to spread crumbs of hope in the name of Jesus Christ?

This random, nameless, outsider, reminds us to look for God in unexpected places and people. To remember, that we are all beggars, desperate for a piece of Jesus to break through the sin of our lives and the world. Amen.