

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost – August 16, 2020

Introduction

The lectionary texts for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost invite us to think about boundaries. The prophet Isaiah writes to a people who have been forced to live in far away Babylon after their nation had been destroyed. Speaking through the prophet, God promises to restore Israel. However, this new Israel will include foreigners and outcasts who were previously excluded by the old Israel. They will gather and worship the God who has drawn them together. While Isaiah speaks to the nation, the Evangelist Matthew talks on a very personal level. Jesus instructs the twelve about what life looks like in the Kingdom where all people are welcome; even those who are outsiders.

The Canaanite woman was an outsider whose daughter was ill. She came to Jesus seeking help, even though she had no legitimate claim on him. She was a Gentile, he was Jewish; yet he healed her daughter. **New boundaries . . . New rules . . . Everyone welcome.** There are lessons here for our churches today. I hope you enjoy exploring the Kingdom's new look using the metaphor of the Hans Christian Anderson's story of the Ugly Duckling.

Pastoral Notes

I have several things I would like to share with you.

- **First**, remember that we will be having parking lot worship at both congregations on August 16 and August 30 [Bethel at 8:30 am and Immanuel at 10:30 am]. We will celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion on both days.
- **Second**, both Immanuel and Bethel Lutheran churches have completed their **Ministry Site Profiles**. Now that I have received them in the mail, I will put together a composite Profile for each council to modify as needed and then approve. This composite profile will detail our needs for pastoral ministry. It will be then be sent to the NE MN Synod to be circulated to potential candidates as they become available for call.
- **And finally**, Bishop Aitken has asked me to serve on **the NE MN Synod Covid-19 Task Force**. This group includes public health professionals, congregational leaders, and several pastors. We are to digest available information on the coronavirus and present recommendations to the bishop. I have accepted the position. One of the first things I learned is that of the more than 130 congregations in our synod, 15 are currently having in-building worship. Most others are meeting outside in parking lots using portable sound systems or small

FM-transmitters so members can remain in their vehicles and listen to the service on their radios. I will keep you posted as this task force begins its ZOOM meetings.

In Christ ✝,

Pastor Steve

Scripture Lesson -- Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

Thus says the LORD:

Maintain justice, and do what is right,
for soon my salvation will come,
and my deliverance be revealed.

⁶And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,
to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD,
and to be his servants,
all who keep the Sabbath, and do not profane it,
and hold fast my covenant —

⁷these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples.

⁸Thus says the Lord GOD,
who gathers the outcasts of Israel?
I will gather others to them
besides those already gathered.

Gospel – Matthew 15.21-28

²¹Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²²Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." ²³But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." ²⁴He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

'Ugly Duckling Theology'

Let us pray. Dearest Jesus, you know us better than we know ourselves. You have seen the darkness that is within us. But despite our brokenness, you continue to love us. **Forgive us** for judging others more harshly than we judge ourselves; **forgive us** for hating others because they are different; **forgive us** for being disciples 'of the world,' rather than disciples 'in the world;' **but most of all, forgive us** for not living in the joy of your gracious love. Send your Holy Spirit upon us and teach us how to be faithful disciples. In your name we pray, amen.

Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

When I was a child, I enjoyed listening to stories that were read to me. One of my favorites was the story of 'The Ugly Duckling' by Hans Christian Anderson. How many of you remember it?

Once upon a time, there was a mother duck who sat faithfully on her nest and warmed her eggs. One day, she could hear the scratching of new life beneath her. When she looked into her nest, she noticed something strange . . . One egg was different than the others. Little did she know how different it would be.

Finally, the great day arrived. One by one, little heads broke through the shells. By the end of the day, five baby ducklings stood by their mother. But four were beautiful, and one was ugly. Four were covered with soft yellow down and one with dirty, gray pin feathers. As the days turned into the weeks, the difference became more apparent. The one was bigger and clumsier than the rest. Because of this, the ugly duckling was avoided by the others. His siblings would have nothing to do with him. They laughed at him and he became the butt of their jokes. His size, his scraggly pin feathers, and his mottled color made him the object of their scorn. The ugly duckling knew that he was different; but he wished that they would accept him for what he was.

The Ugly Duckling is a story of rejection and separation. Those who should have loved, did not. Those who should have understood, would not. As a result, the ugly duckling was left to grow up alone. All this notwithstanding, the ugly duckling was different. Somehow, a swan's egg had found its way into mother duck's nest. And when all the eggs were hatched, the baby swan grew up as a duckling – an 'ugly duckling.'

Hans Christian Anderson's story tells how this ungainly creature was mocked by its siblings. To make matters worse, the forest creatures joined in teasing the unfortunate young swan. You see? The ducklings were 'insiders' and 'insiders' always make the rules. They are ones who tell others what to believe. They are the ones who are the guardians

of what is right and what is wrong. And they are the ones who decide who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out.’ The story however does have a happy ending: *The taunting ends when the ‘ugly duckling’ becomes a beautiful swan and is accepted for whom he really is.*

But this more than just a child’s story. This is a story that talks about something most of us know a good deal about. Sociologists tell us that from childhood, most of us struggle with peer pressure and lack of acceptance by others. And, if we dare to be honest, I suspect that we all have painful stories to tell. We experience rejection in families, in communities, in churches, and even among friends. *Those who should be loving and accepting, oftentimes are not.*

I believe that we are both ‘duck’ and ‘swan’ in real life. Sometimes, we reject others; and at other times, we are the ones rejected. Just ask the child who is always picked last in playground games . . . Just ask the son or daughter who is shunned by family members because they do not live up to expectations . . . Or just ask the new person in town who doesn’t seem to fit in with everyone else. Rejection is very real. And whatever the situation, there is always pain — excruciating pain.

It’s not surprising then, that ‘Ugly Duckling Theology’ finds its way into the Church. ‘Ugly Duckling Theology’ is a way of thinking that has haunted God’s people from their very beginning. It is a theology that discriminates and draws lines. It readily identifies those who are regarded as ‘saints’ and those who are ‘sinners.’ It marks the sins of some as being worse than the sins of others. It is a theology that makes some insiders and others outsiders. In short, it is a theology that divides rather than unites, making the all too human distinction between the ‘righteous’ and the ‘unrighteous.’

The irony, of course, is that these same unrelenting standards were applied to Jesus himself. In the beginning of his Gospel, St. John catches the irony of this rejection. He writes, ‘*[Jesus] came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.*’ We often talk about ‘going home’ to those we love, but there was no ‘going home’ for Jesus because he was considered to be an ‘outsider.’ His was to be a life of sorrow and rejection that would lead to death on a lonely cross outside Jerusalem. Then, as now, Jesus is rejected as an ‘outsider’ by the very world that needs him – a world whose people are hopelessly separated from God and from each other.

In today’s Gospel, ‘Ugly Duckling Theology’ came into play when the Canaanite woman approached Jesus seeking help. But the disciples were certain that Jesus would not help her. After all, she was a foreigner; a Canaanite woman who had no legitimate claim upon Jesus. Everybody knew that she was not part of God’s People. There was a boundary she was on the other side. But according to Matthew, the woman did not

relent. The more they pushed her away, the louder she screamed. Soon, she had her way, and stood before Jesus. In a few moments, she went away rejoicing because her daughter was healed.

Had Matthew only outlined the story, we could just walk away and say, ‘How nice of Jesus to heal the woman’s daughter.’ But unfortunately, Matthew also provides the dialog between Jesus and the woman. As they talk, it seems as if Jesus agrees with his disciples. We are horrified and embarrassed because this isn't the way he's supposed to act. It appears as if Jesus has bad manners.

When the woman cried, ‘Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon,’ Jesus did not answer. Instead, he turned to the disciples and said, ‘I WAS SENT ONLY TO THE LOST SHEEP OF THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL.’ But the woman came and knelt before him and said, ‘Lord, help me!’ And Jesus answered, ‘IT IS NOT FAIR TO TAKE THE CHILDREN'S BREAD AND THROW IT TO THE DOGS.’ Again the woman spoke, “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.” Then Jesus said, ‘O WOMAN, GREAT IS YOUR FAITH! BE IT DONE AS YOU DESIRE.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.

When we read this, we have all sorts of questions. Why did Jesus hesitate to do a miracle? Why did Jesus worry about her nationality when she came seeking help? And the most baffling question: Why wasn't Jesus more compassionate?

After some thought, I realized that to see a recalcitrant Jesus is to miss Matthew’s point. To do so is to bring modern sensitivities to situation where they are inappropriate. Matthew is not giving us a window into Jesus’ personality. Nothing could be further from the point. Instead, he is making a theological statement about Jesus’ identity.

In the Evangelist Matthew’s church, the relationship of Jew and Gentile was a hotly debated question. On the one extreme, there were Christians who believed that one must keep the Jewish Law to be a Christian. On the other extreme, there were many Christians who believed that Christianity existed apart from Judaism altogether. In other words, is Jesus a ‘Jewish Messiah’ only or is Jesus a *Messiah for everyone*. What is at stake, I think, is Jesus’ mission. To whom will the Kingdom come? Will it come to the Jews first, and then to the world; or to sinners, regardless of station in life or nationality, who come seeking God. *In other words, does God's grace have boundaries?*

So what are we to make of this uncomfortable story? I believe that the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman explores boundaries – Boundaries that are very much a part of our lives today. We live between the boundary of sin and the boundary of God's grace.

First, the boundary of sin. We are separated from God, and from each other, by our sin. And as a result, our world is not what it was created to be. I have neither the time nor the energy to lecture you on the brokenness our world. You have only to watch the evening news, or read the morning newspaper, or scan the internet. Not only do we see it in the media, but we experience it firsthand in our community: personal tragedies like illness and death; economic pressure because of employment changes at the mill; a declining population base, and family troubles that include, alcoholism, violence, estrangement, and separation. And the list goes on and on.

I often hear people wondering why all these things are happening now. They wonder why things cannot be more like the *'good old days.'* Let me suggest an answer. ////

More than once we have been characterized as a 'lost and disillusioned people.' People whose dreams have proven false and let them down; people who, to use Luther's words, are *'turned in upon themselves.'* More often than not, we fool ourselves into thinking that we have no hand in our fate; that we are only corks, floating on the raging sea we call *'life.'* This is sin. Not only are we the victims, but we are also the perpetrators. We use buzz words like: *'self-fulfillment,' 'individuality,' and 'freedom'* to draw boundaries tightly around ourselves at the expense of our brothers and sisters. As our nation struggles with the pandemic, this has been illustrated by those who refuse to social distance, wear masks in public, and insist on gathering in large groups despite the risks to the health of others.

Every time we criticize or second guess a brother or sister, we draw a boundary between us and them. And soon our actions echo the words of the disciples as they urged Jesus to have nothing to do with the Canaanite woman. ***'Get out of here,'*** they yelled at her, ***'we don't need you, and Jesus doesn't either.'*** This is how sin works. It first separates us from others and then it finally separates us from God. The boundary of sin is very real, and it means death for us all.

Second, the boundary of God's grace. Today, in our small community in rural Minnesota, the story of the Canaanite woman challenges the boundaries we so easily draw. Whatever label we hang on a person, Jesus brushes it aside and meets their needs. The good news is that God's gracious love for us has no boundaries. In God's Kingdom, there are no ducks and swans. All are welcome.

Think again about Hans Christian Anderson's story. The *'ugly duckling'* becomes a beautiful swan. A beautiful swan who does not reject us in our brokenness. Dying rejected and alone on the cross, Jesus said, ***'FATHER, FORGIVE THEM, FOR THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO.'*** And that is good news!

But even more important: God's grace is for all people, even sinners like us. Like the Canaanite woman, we have no claim upon Jesus; like the Canaanite woman, we are sinful and unclean; and like the Canaanite woman, we also experience the grace of God because, there are no ugly ducklings in the Kingdom. Amen.