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The Rev. Laurie L. Newman

Matthew 15:10-28

St. Andrew Lutheran, Beaverton

The comic strip “Momma” by Mell Lazarus shows Momma’s youngest son, Francis, dropping by her house and saying, “Momma, I’m bringing my new girlfriend in to meet you. Now, will you keep an open mind?” Momma replies, “Yes, dear.” “Remember, Momma, an open mind! Open!” She waits, smiling to herself, and in the last frame, turns to the reader and remarks: “You’d be surprised how much prejudice can be crammed into an open mind.”

This passage in Matthew comes after many examples of Jesus’ healing and teaching. He was sought by crowds. He makes clear to the religious authorities that outward expressions of piety don’t matter. It’s how your heart is, that counts. The Canaanite woman, found him, knelt at his feet, and begged Jesus to heal her daughter. He replied: “Let the children be fed first. It’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Jesus was blunt. His mission was to the children of Israel, not Canaanites. Sharing his gift with the gentile “dogs” wouldn’t be fair, implying that there’s just not enough healing power to go around. Yes, he called her a dog. In his culture, a dog was not the friendly, fur child that we love. Dogs were used as herders, but weren’t kept as pets. They often ran wild and in packs. They were considered to be unclean, and to be avoided. I don’t think there is a way to pretty this up. Jesus’ first response to the woman was excluding. She was Gentile and his “no” response may have been from prejudice.

Some sermons flow, and others keep us wrestling. This passage from Matthew is one of the wrestling ones. Why did Jesus call the Canaanite woman a dog? Why, when she begged for healing for her little daughter, why was his first response—no? Where is the justice? Where is the compassion? Could Jesus really have been so unkind? And, this disturbs me, too: her hunger for justice for her daughter was so great, she’d be content with the crumbs under the table. Hungry for even just crumbs. . .

What are you hungry for? Consolation? Healing? Peace of mind? Security? Hope? Love? Justice? What would you kneel and beg for? What would move you to endure risk, loss, perhaps even humiliation—all for justice and love? What person or situation would inspire you to beg for crumbs?

Does this bother you as much as it does me? The very idea that Jesus would dole out healing grace as though it was limited; that he shared in the prevailing prejudice of his time and culture; that he helped reluctantly, because she made a good argument, because she had “chutzpah”? This is unsettling! But the woman persists, Jesus changes his mind, and God’s grace triumphs – and brings healing to her daughter. The woman, by her bold insistence, and faith, becomes part of the means of God’s grace.

The woman’s persistence for justice made me think about the protests by former NFL quarterback, Colin Kaepernick. He played for six seasons with the San Francisco 49ers. You probably remember that he kneeled during the national anthem in order to draw attention to the

racial prejudice fueling brutality in our US justice systems. Colin said: “To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. . . There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder. . . I am not looking for approval. I have to stand up for people that are oppressed. If they take football away, my endorsements from me — I know that I stood up for what is right. . . With or without the NFL’s platform, I will continue to work for the people because my platform is the people.” For what, or whom would you kneel – for justice?

A few years ago, Nike chose Kaepernick to be the face of their ad campaign. The text was: “Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything.” Of course, the ad campaign became a controversial, too. Colin Kaepernick’s protest met with such reaction that despite his track record as talented quarterback, he has not been signed to football since 2017.

The Canaanite woman, and Kaepernick, demonstrate that what we kneel for matters. What or who in your life needs mercy, healing, justice? What about St. Andrew? This congregation is Reconciling in Christ, and though there is a high degree of homogeneity in our community, we hold a deep desire to be inclusive. If you look on page 2 of the worship folder, you’ll see our statement of welcome, including: “. . . all are welcome, without exception, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, physical or mental ability, education, income, or family status. . .” We aspire to this, and like Jesus, at times, our traditions, habits and perspectives may not be as broad as we intend to be.

I’m enjoying the conversations that happen on our worship planning team, and on our Transition Team. Sometimes we talk about how the identity and character here at St. Andrew is deeply grounded in the liturgy and music of the organ—and how that bumps up against different styles of worship and music that are less familiar here. It’s important to know who we are, and what we offer, and to be true to that. And, it’s also important not to rush to “no!” when we are presented with new people, and new ways. . . Guests who bring new experiences and perspective can help us grow. God’s grace won’t be stopped. . .

When reading scripture, it is helpful to read what comes next. That is certainly true in this case. When the woman persisted, saying “Even dogs get the crumbs,” Jesus replied, “For saying that —your daughter is healed.” The next stories show Jesus healing the maimed, blind, and mute. And then Then, Jesus goes to another pagan area and feeds not just one or two, but five thousand hungry people, all probably Gentiles. The woman’s bold insistence upon healing had an impact on Jesus. God’s grace won’t be limited.

Jesus takes five loaves and fishes to the multitude of hungry outsiders. All are fed. And there are baskets and baskets filled with the leftovers. While we may be troubled by Jesus’ initial reaction to the woman, his encounter with her led Jesus to become who he was called to be: a healer and messenger of hope for everyone: male and female, Jew and Gentile, poor and rich. One in whom we see the infinite and vast mercy of God, and in whom we find abundant life.

Sometimes, when we look closely at the places where prejudices fester, we see fear. Fear of insufficiency, fear of scarcity. We believe there is not enough: not enough money, not enough work, not enough food, not enough love. But, with God, it's just the opposite: The more we love, the more love grows. It grows like yeast, hidden in the dough, making a fresh, fragrant, abundant loaf.

This season of transition at St. Andrew is a time to trust love, and not to fear . . . The more we love, the more love grows. On September 9, the Transition Team will lead a Visioning Event. The whole congregation is invited. It's an opportunity to dream, to imagine what St. Andrew will be in the years ahead. And, just as Jesus had his mind opened by the encounter with the woman, so, we have an opportunity to think outside the box. To dream.

At the end of the Nike ad that Colin Kaepernick says: "Don't ask if your dreams are crazy. Ask if they're crazy enough." Was it crazy for the Canaanite woman to expect healing for her daughter? Maybe, but she didn't stop. Healing comes when we keep open minds and hearts, and don't stuff them with fixed attitudes. The Holy Spirit moves us to open ourselves. To receive the loaves and fishes.

I swim most days in a pool that has only three lanes for lap swimming. It's a shallow pool, only getting as deep as 5 feet. Two people can swim side-by-side in each lane. But most people at this pool don't circle-swim, so often when I arrive, rather than hopping right into a lane to swim, I have to wait or convince someone to share a lane. To complicate it even more, I have a lane preference for the lane right next to the wall, because being very near-sighted and swimming without glasses, I feel more confident when I've got a wall to guide me. When I manage to get that lane, I'm really happy (and a bit possessive of it). Really, there are NOT enough lanes to go around.

So, I had timed things just right and was swimming in the lane next to the wall. I was sharing the lane with a man who is often there at the same time. On my fifth lap back, I noticed an older woman waving me to the side. She showed me that the man I was sharing the lane with had left. She asked me if I could swim in his spot, and let her have the wall side. "I don't swim," she explained. Mentally, I rolled my eyes and thought, why would you choose a pool for exercise if you can't swim!? And, since I got here first, why should I give up my spot? No! But, aloud, I grumbled, grudgingly: "Yes, you can use the wall side, but I also like the wall because I'm so near-sighted."

I moved over and she began to water-walk next to the wall. We went on like that for a few minutes, and then we both paused. "My name is Laurie." "I'm Lillian." "That's my grandmother's name!" I said. She beamed at me and said, "I asked the Lord to touch your eyes!" I was moved by her kindness, and thought: She did open my eyes. She showed me that there was an abundance of space to be shared, and that my yielding to her was vastly more important than keeping to my possessive routine. Jesus invites us to move to the "yes!" To receive the loaves and fishes, to receive love and new life.