

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511



“Out of Bounds”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

September 6, 2015

Proverbs 22:1–12, 8–9, 22–23; Psalm 125; Mark 7:24–37

Jesus is wandering again, which should come as no surprise to anyone.

Jesus has been prone to wander since the age of twelve

when he deviated from his parents while on a return trip

from Jerusalem to Nazareth;

when he went missing for three days, only to be discovered later in Jerusalem’s

temple courts, nonchalantly chatting with the temple teachers.

His parents were astonished, his mother obviously annoyed with his obliviousness

to how upsetting this had been to them, not to mention the inconvenience.

But Jesus dismisses her with a “*that’s just how I am*” statement;

better get used to it. (Luke 2:41–50)

And so here we are again, this time with the adult Jesus wandering northwest,

some 30 miles from the Sea of Galilee into the vicinity of Tyre,

which is predominantly Gentile territory.

Perhaps he goes there to dodge the crowds that have followed him like paparazzi.

Mark tells us that he ducks into a house along the way, not wanting anyone

to know his whereabouts.

But one unnamed woman does discover his secret hideaway: a Gentile woman

of Greek descent, who comes begging for him to heal her daughter,

who is disturbingly possessed.

And once again, Jesus seems to misread the emotional import of the encounter, as he did at twelve with his own mother.

He tries to dismiss this woman, too, with a “that’s just how I am” statement:

“Let the children be fed *first*, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs,” he says to her rather coolly. (Mark 7: 27)

In other words, according to scholars, Jesus discerns his “I am” mission to be primarily to the Jews *first*, but not necessarily to the Jews exclusively.

That one word, *first*, makes all the difference as to how his statement is heard.

He could very easily have said, “Let the children (of Israel) be fed *only*,”

but he tempered his statement by saying, “Let the children of Israel be fed (and maybe he hesitated here)... *first*...”

Sometimes, I think, transformation occurs in our moments of hesitation!

Although his encounter with this woman seems out of character for Jesus,

future hope for the Gentiles is encrypted in his response

as is his ensuing healing of the woman’s daughter from a distance, sight unseen—a sign of things to come, healing acts and unitive outcomes.

This out of bounds episode is followed immediately by another Jesus side trip

even further into Gentile territory, looping clockwise

into the region of the Decapolis, for a miraculous healing of a man

doubly handicapped by both deafness and dumbness.

As a result of Jesus’ wandering tendency, this man’s ears are opened

and his tongue is released so that he speaks plainly;

as are the tongues of the observers released, so that they also speak plainly

of the miracle they have heard and witnessed.

Sometimes wandering out of bounds gives new perspective on our human limitations

and fresh insight into God’s unlimited and boundaryless agenda, it seems.

My favorite line in both of these stories is in verse 34, where Mark says

rather as an understatement, *he sighed* (he, being Jesus).
As Jesus touched the man's dulled ears and captive tongue, he looked up to
heaven, and... *he sighed* before healing him. He exhaled.
Perhaps *he sighed* to empty himself of his own spirit
so that God's Spirit might flow through him towards this man.
Perhaps he exhaled the *ruach*/the Spirit of God into this long-suffering man.
Perhaps *he sighed* a silent prayer connecting creature to Creator,
connecting suffering to salvation, connecting humanity to the divine.
Perhaps *he sighed* in exasperation that his singular efforts
would hardly be adequate to meet the magnitude of need in the world.
Perhaps *he sighed* in frustration that he is only able to heal some for now.
Perhaps *he sighed* a sigh of relief that his grace was beginning to
overflow its bounds, even into the arena of the Gentiles.

I have told some of you a recent encounter my husband and I had
when we wandered out of bounds in response to an invitation
from some Muslim friends in Cary
to attend a break-the-fast dinner during the month of Ramadan.
Their place of worship is in an unmarked corner of a strip mall,
and dinner was served following worship behind the mall in an obscure parking.
We supposed their need to be unannounced and somewhat hidden was necessary
for their safety, which is unfortunate, indeed.
It was a lovely day in July, one of this summer's cooler evenings, when we gathered
after sundown, under the stars, for a feast with these friends and families
following the ritual Muslim prayers for their holy days.
As we were sitting across the table from three wonderful
about-the-age-of Jesus Muslim men who work in the Triangle,
they asked without presumption if our church ever hosted meals
like this for our neighbors in Durham.
And I said, "Yes," without thinking, which usually gets me into trouble.

And then I had to think really fast as to whether what I said was true or not...

“Uhhh, during our holy days of Advent and Lent,

we opened our doors to our neighbors for Wednesday evening worship
and dinner last year, hoping to catch some of the new apartment dwellers
in our area, but only the homeless came with any regularity,” I said.

To which they replied, “Isn’t that wonderful, that the homeless trust you enough
to come and eat dinner with you!”

“Yes,” I replied hesitantly, appreciating their new perspective on my remark.

“Yes... it is wonderful to be in a downtown place where we can share a meal
so easily with our homeless neighbors. Not everyone can do that!”

And then the conversation became even more interesting,

as one of the Muslim men offered this olive branch of empathy:

“We are so sorry about what happened to *your people* in Charleston recently.

That was such a tragedy,” he commented.

And once again, I was so flabbergasted by this change of perspective,
that I had to pause and swallow my food before I could respond.

“Yes... it was truly terrible to have the lives of those nine people cut short,
and their families so terrorized. Thank you for caring.”

With his amazing olive branch of compassion, this man had so quickly erased
the boundary lines of race that usually color this story

and made it an issue of religious persecution with which they
could so easily identify and with which we were suddenly united
as we broke bread at table.

Like the man whom Jesus touched and healed from his deafness and dumbness,
my ears were opened and my tongue released to this remarkable change
of perspective that rocked my world and revealed a deeper truth:

Sometimes wandering out of bounds, like Jesus, gives us

new transforming perspective on our human limitations

and fresh insight into God’s unlimited and boundaryless agenda.

I'm still haunted by those remarkable conversations that night!

Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish is a healer, like Jesus, who is Muslim,
who was born and grew up in the Jabalia refugee camp in Gaza,
who received a degree in Public Health from Harvard
and a diploma in Obstetrics and Gynecology
from the Ministry of Health in Saudi Arabia and from the University of London,
and who subsequently was allowed *to wander* across the border
to conduct his residency in ob-gyn at the Soroka Hospital in Israel,
thus becoming the first Palestinian doctor to be on staff at an Israeli hospital.
In his amazing memoir entitled *I Shall Not Hate*, he talks about the daily horror
of crossing the Erez border delineating Gaza from Israel:
of living with one leg in Palestine and the other in Israel most of his adult life,
of helping to bring babies, new life, into this fractured and divided world,
of helping Palestinian and Israeli couples overcome infertility,
and of researching health care on poor populations in both areas.
His Arabic name, *Abuelaish*, he explains, means, *Abu*, the one who, and *El Aish*,
provides bread, hospitality and care for his guests.
He learned early on that disease does not recognize borders and that hospitals
are places where humanity can be discovered and where people can be
treated without racism and as equals.
He was a doctor without borders on a personal peacemaking mission
to build bridges between people divided by politics,
but united by a desire to lead healthy and wholesome lives.

All was going well with his divided-life experiment until September 2008,
when his wife, Nadia, died as a result of acute leukemia, leaving their
eight children in Gaza motherless.

Stunned and dazed by her sudden death, Abuelaish struggled to keep his young
family together, acting as father and mother to them, through that fall

and into the winter.

As the new year of 2009 began, saber rattling between Israel and Hamas intensified, resulting in a 23 day assault by Israel on the Gaza Strip.

The Abuelaish family was prepared for living through this, having stockpiled food, water and kerosene, having arranged a sleeping plan which placed some children against one wall and some against another so if their apartment were hit, everyone would not be injured.

But they were not prepared for death, again.

On January 16, 2009, just five months after his wife's death, three of his young daughters were on the wrong wall when a shell hit their apartment.

Abuelaish's first call for help was to his contacts on the other side, his Israeli friends:

"YaRabbi, YaRabbi—my God, my God—they shelled my house.

They killed my daughters. What have we done?"

(Abuelaish, p. 177)

And from that point on, Abuelaish's energy focused upon efforts to resist responding to this atrocity with hatred, but instead to get people talking to each other across borders and boundaries so that, as he said, his daughters might be "the last sacrifice on the road to peace between Palestinians and Israelis." (Abuelaish, p. xv)

He knows it isn't probable, but he certainly wishes it were possible!

I have to admit that I am baffled by the boundary issues concerning the Israelis and the Palestinians, and I hope some day that it can resolve peacefully into a two-state solution.

Last year at the PC(USA) General Assembly, the hot-button topic was the BDS movement, which stood for *boycott, divestment, and sanctions* of three American companies, Caterpillar, Hewlett-Packard, and Motorola, which have been involved in the aggressive

Israeli occupation of the Palestinian West Bank.

We talked about this motion for days and late into the nights,

and finally passed it by a very slim majority of seven votes, 310-303.

I couldn't vote for it, I have to tell you, because I couldn't find biblical rationale for

a boycott, nor could I justify the damage it would do to the good Judeo-

Christian relationships we have nurtured locally and elsewhere.

So, I was on the losing side of that equation, although I certainly want the peace

and two-state solution that it is hoping to foster... just not in this way.

And this particular motion by the Presbyterian Church got much publicity

for its boldness, and it made headlines around the world.

Another similar motion on the floor of General Assembly last summer

attracted very little attention, however.

Within our new *Glory to God* hymnal which the church recently published,

there is a subsection entitled, "God's Covenant with Israel."

And the Presbytery of Chicago proposed a motion to the General Assembly

to distinguish between biblical terms for Israel in Christian liturgy

and those applied to the modern state of Israel,

and more specifically to retitle the section of the new hymnal,

"God's Covenant with Ancient Israel" or even "Our Covenant with the Oppressed."

How we would erase Israel or Zion or Jerusalem from all of our liturgy

is problematic, as I see it, and this motion was defeated fairly easily at GA.

Who would think that a hymnal would be seen as political propaganda?

Nevertheless, the motion to erase Israel from our Presbyterian vocabulary

in hopes of working towards peace is disturbing to me.

Perhaps one solution would be to include more references to Palestine,

as in our PC(USA) *Confession of 1967* which states,

"Jesus, a Palestinian Jew, lived among his own people

and shared their needs, temptation, joys, and sorrows." (9.08)

In this one peacemaking sentence, Jesus is placed in solidarity

with both Palestinians and Jews, sharing what Dr. Abuelaish also noted, their common desire, our common desire, to lead healthy and wholesome lives.

These are boundary issues, the same kind of issues that Jesus dealt with, and the same kind of issues that Jesus encountered *with a sigh*: *with a sigh* of longing for resolution, *with a sigh* of yearning for relief, *with a sigh* of frustration over the magnitude of the problem, historically, geographically and politically, *with a sigh* of heartbreak and lament over so many lives lost, *with a sigh* to be used as a conduit of God's Holy Spirit, and also *with a sigh* of determination, that taking first steps out of bounds sometimes is taking first steps in the direction of healing and towards the prayerful opening of ears, attitudes, and tongues. "Ephphatha," Jesus declared: be opened, be awed, be transformed by God's unlimited and boundaryless love. Amen.