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“The Outsider”

A sermon by Sam R. Miglarese

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Isaiah 56:1–7; Ps. 133; Romans 11:1–2a, 29–32; Matthew 15:21–28

Gracious God, you affirm so often and in so many ways that all are welcome, all outsiders are welcome into your house of prayer. Deliver us who gather here this morning from all prejudice and from whatever else hinders us from union and peace with you, our God, and with one another. Amen.

In your first hearing of the Scriptures today, it is clear that a theme coalesces around the notion of foreigners and outsiders all being welcomed into the house of God’s prayer. In Isaiah, this prophetic utterance that God makes through his prophet, Isaiah, is a very moving one because we know of the unique covenant, the privileged place that Jews have with their One Savior God. He stayed with them, and they stayed with him throughout all sorts of trials and tribulations, and yet, in the midst of all that, our God says, “The foreigners who joined 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 to my covenant, they will be accepted. For my house shall be called the house of prayer for all peoples.”

This proclamation rings true with the core values of this congregation. We went through a long process with Scottie Seawell as our facilitator, and came up with a series of formulations that capture the heart of who we are. One of the key themes that emerged from all of you in the discussions and the debates and the final formulation was simply one of inclusivity: that all are welcome. The very first lines in our bulletin today affirm that value: all are welcome. No matter what the difference is that divide us, all are welcome around the table of the Lord’s Word and Sacrament.

And yet, whenever we affirm that ideal, we know the movement from the ideal to the real is not all that clear, and can be very demanding. That is why it is appropriate that we revisit the values that are at the core of who we are so that we are attentive to being a hospitable community despite all the differences that come through our door.

The Scripture lesson for Matthew is odd in its relationship to Romans and Isaiah. It is odd because the conversation that Jesus has with the Canaanite woman betrays the fundamental theme of universalism and inclusivity. This is the first time that I know that Jesus does not respond with immediate and instant compassion and healing. In Matthew, there is a man born blind, and he says almost the same words as this woman from Canaan who says, "Lord, son of David, have mercy on me. I am blind, and I want to see." The Lord responds to his faith with the gift of sight. There is a story of the man with his boy with epilepsy, who cries out, "Lord, son of David, have mercy on me." And the Lord responds immediately and instantly with a compassionate word of healing, freeing that child from epilepsy. And yet, there is a different pattern here, as Jesus walks outside the friendly confines of Galilee into Tyre and Sidon and encounters a woman from Canaan. Those are loaded words: Canaan and woman. A different place, a different time, a different ethnic group, a different gender in a patriarchal society, and she comes up to him and says, "Have mercy on me, Lord. My daughter is tormented by a demon." Driven by a mother's compassion for her child, she seeks from this man of God a healing word.

His first response is no response. He simply doesn't answer her at all. The disciples see this as a cue to dismiss her even more, as we've noticed before in other circumstances. The disciples urged him to send her away, "for she bothers us. She keeps shouting after us." Jesus seems to ignore them, too, and he answers her with, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel."

This articulates his mission: what it means for him to be sent. He is being sent to bring the fullness of God's kingdom first as his number one priority to the House of Israel, to the lost sheep of the House of Israel. It is as if he were saying, "I need to stay focused on what I'm called to do and to be about."

She listens. At this time, she comes forward and kneels in front of him, blocks his way, and says, "Lord, help me." She is reduced to simply a plea for help. And he

answers in a way that, no matter how you cut it, is very insulting. He answers her by saying, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” I have always found this rather puzzling, but it does show us that Jesus was conditioned by his times and his culture, and in some ways, he was not free from the prejudices of his own day.

And yet, she persists. She doesn’t leave in rage, like I would have, if I had stood before him and got that kind of answer. I am not a dog. Jesus was not pretending here nor was he just using the crude language of the day. But she said, “Yes, Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their Master’s table.”

And it was at that moment that I believe, in this dialogue, taking it in the context of its own place, that Jesus gets it, that he is stretched. There is a breakthrough moment, there is a transformative experience, there is a moment of grace, there is an insight, but he gets it, and he turns to her and says, “Woman, great is your faith.” If you read the lessons and the stories shortly before this, he just accused his own disciples of little faith, and yet she is a woman from a distant place, who is the other, the enemy, the outsider, who is a woman, different ethnicity. She is the one who is full of great faith. And then, it was done for her as she has pleaded and as she appealed for throughout the course of this conversation—her daughter was healed immediately.

I believe that this text offers us an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of what “all are welcome” means for a congregation and how we handle difference in our own families and in our own society that is heavily politicized, full of all sorts of partisan groups that force us into one camp or another, all claiming that God is on their side.

For those of you who have children who are growing up in the stages of life, you know that some days, we have never been their age. Their music, their drama, their experiences of life are different and force us, as parents, to reconcile their differences with our own sense of things. It pushes our boundaries, helps us appreciate how their differences force and stretch us to be more open and more caring and more sensitive to their own experiences.

We are about to celebrate 9/11 in this nation of ours. It will be a very painful memory for many of us. I am very proud to say that our church will be the place that will house an interfaith worship service for the community of Durham as the various universities also have their own opportunities to discuss, reflect, and memorialize those who died on that fateful day. It will give us another chance to reconcile differences where the other doesn't become necessarily the enemy by virtue of their ethnicity, their religion, or any other difference.

I hope that the story that you have just heard will become for you a pattern upon which we will build the way we deal with differences. Jesus stayed with the woman. He may have been tempted to follow the disciples' wishes to dismiss her, but he stayed with her. He listened to her. He engaged in conversation with her and, ultimately, received the moment of grace, a turning point, so to speak, to recognize that his mission from the Father is extended to everybody: outsiders as well as insiders, those who are of the covenant and those who are not. So I encourage you, in the course of your dealing with differences in your life, to look on this story of Jesus and his breakthrough moment as an opportunity for you to deal with your own.

Let us pray.

Gracious God, let us be stretched to see that the differences of religions, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and economic disparity are not used as examples of the other or as enemies but for us to see them as one of your own, one with whom we share a common humanity, a common faith in God, and a common desire for the well-being of all your children. Help us to see faith, even when it comes from unlikely people and from unlikely situations. And may we come to the table of the Lord this day and experience together the nourishment that gives us the strength to accept differences as members of Christ's diverse Body. Amen.

—Thanks to Barbara Reid and John Shea for their influence on shaping this sermon.