

“Love Knows No Limits”  
MATTHEW 15: 10-12,21-28

A man and his son are driving along and get into a bad car accident. The ambulance shows up and takes them both to the hospital. The son is rushed into surgery. The doctor who will perform the surgery enters the operating room, but as soon as the doctor sees the patient, the doctor says, “I can’t operate on this boy, he is my son.” How is this possible? The answer: The doctor is the boy’s mother.

This is one of those riddles that help us examine some of our prejudices. One of the stereotypes we have is that doctors are males, despite the fact that women have been in the field of medicine as doctors since the 1850’s in this country.

Today’s Bible story is not that different in that sense. We have in Matthew 15 a woman whose faith is an example for many, yet, she is dismissed by the disciples as someone who was annoying them. She was of a different race. She was an outsider to them. Where they were and where she came from was the district of Tyre and Sidon which was Canaanite territory on the Mediterranean coast to the north and west of Galilee. The citizens were a greatly mixed people who may still have had some Canaanite blood, but also were diluted by infusions of Syrian and Phoenician elements. They were Gentiles, of course, and thoroughly Hellenized since the time of Alexander the Great. The designation of a Canaanite woman in vs. 22 was typically a Jewish term of disdain. This was even more troubling because Jesus himself tells the woman that she was an outsider. She was someone they didn’t need to pay attention to and who didn’t deserve the crumbs that fell off the table. Jesus called her a dog. The story is powerful, but it is not nice—“dog” is an insult to a woman who is racialized and it is Jesus, not the disciples, who is doing the insulting. This is of course troubling for many biblical scholars. There are all kinds of interpretations out there of why Jesus would do such a thing. Some scholars say that Jesus was just trying to teach a lesson about bigotry to the disciples and the people around him. Yet, this is kind of hard to accept because in other instances we find Jesus doing the right thing and then teaching about it. Other scholars and homilists have attempted to make this story nice by saying that Jesus was testing the woman because he recognized her strength of character; the two engaged in a mutual exercise of role-playing to teach the disciples a lesson; the exchange was playful and the dogs in question were puppies and pets. All of this is to make sure that we would never think that Jesus was challenged by the woman’s understanding.

This reminds me of the popular saying, “What Would Jesus Do?” This is something we hear many people saying as if it is a formula that shows that Jesus has an answer for everything and life is just very simple. Everything is black and white and if we ask this question of WWJD, then we would know what to do exactly. I think this story helps us to see that Jesus knew that life and faith were more complex than simple pre-packaged answers. He listened to the woman. He didn’t dismiss her like the disciples wanted him to. He actually engaged her in a conversation where he paid attention to what she had to say and took it into serious consideration even though it was against the norms of his day. He then announces to the world that the woman’s faith is great. He also heals her daughter. This is the kind of love and life that Jesus invites us to; a life of openness to the other even though we might have preconceived notions about them.

How many times do we listen to others in our lives without being closed to what they have to say? This is especially important with those we disagree with or who come from a very different background. What if these people came from the wrong side of the tracks? In Batavia, people always knew the difference between the people on the north side of town and the south side of town. Those on the south side were the underprivileged and the immigrants.

The Canaanite woman was a faith leader. She had enough faith to stand up and challenge the preconceived notions of the Jewish faith of who was to be in or out. But no one recognized her as a leader. This same question about leadership is just as important to us today

as it was in the time of Jesus. Who is a leader in our perception? What do they look like? Is a black person OK for president? What are some qualities that our society defines in a leader? Here is a list that most organizations see as the norm for leaders: assertive, visionary, educated, has knowledge, rational, and communicates well. The traditional opposite qualities of a leader are: emotional, free-spirited, hands-on learner, willing to change directions based on input of others, etc. What about gender and race?

Fortunately, new models of leadership are emerging. Leaders are now more about community, empowerment and inclusivity, realizing that there is more power and creativity through relationships. More and more organizations and groups are realizing that leadership is something that equips all and respects all who are involved. The old models of lone rangers are proving to be inadequate for our age. We need a different worldview of dialogue, valuing and loving all in order for us to bring healing and wholeness to our world. Yet, it is important for us to examine our preconceived notions about who is in and who is out, who is a leader and who is not? Are we ready for different kinds of leaders? Are we ready to let God transform our concepts of power and leadership?

In his book, *Leadership without Easy Answers* Ron Heifetz gives us an example of what happens when people are not ready for empowering leaders, "The events surrounding Gorbachev's disruption of the Soviet Union illustrate more fully the overlap between dominance and authority. The Soviet revolution of 1917 inherited a people conditioned during centuries of Czarist Russia to defer to the government. Stalin's domination reinforced this difference. In contrast, Gorbachev intended *perestroika*, the restructuring, to invert people's orientation to power. He intended to give local business and city governments the power and responsibility for solving their own problems, possibly in divergence with commands from the central government. But Gorbachev found that giving people power does not readily produce empowered and responsible citizens. Not only do people have to change their concepts of power and responsibility, they also have to give up the payoffs of deference: political and economic security."

Last week I participated in the leadership of a gathering for Racial Ethnic Young Adult Women of the Presbyterian Church. It was a great experience for me to be in the presence of amazing, intelligent, creative and diverse group of women. They were of different races and walks of life. These are the voices we need to be more in our mainline media and church leadership. Yet, often they are the marginalized and seldom heard voices. At the gathering, there was a sense of mutuality and respect. One marker of how we were intentional about empowering and including all the participants was the use of mutual invitation in all of our group discussion times. Mutual Invitation is a way to allow everyone who would like to share the opportunity to speak. We intentionally avoided sharing in a circular or "round robin" format to keep ourselves listening, present, and open. Mutual Invitation proceeds in the following way: The leader would share first. After that person has spoken, he or she then invites another to share, saying, "I invite (name)." Who you invite should ideally not be the person next to you. After the next person has spoken, that person is given the privilege to invite another to share. If you don't want to say anything, you simply say "pass" and proceed to invite another to share. This method may seem simple but it has great power if practiced in all circles and discussions because in most discussion groups we most often end up with a few people who dominate the conversation and the direction of action instead of listening to the wisdom of the whole body.

What is amazing to me is that Jesus was that kind of leader. That is why I believe that in most of our biblical stories we see that the poor and the outcast are so often the ones who recognize Jesus' power.

God's invitation to us today is to have everyone at the table because this is important for the wholeness of our soul and for the soul of our world. This is not to uplift one group against

another. This is to say that we need all people at the table. They are not just being invited to be in the house, but also to be leaders, just as the Canaanite woman was a leader of faith. There are many examples of amazing leaders in our world and they come from different walks of life and different backgrounds. It is important to remember that in order to be open to others because God calls us to be a loving and inclusive community, especially to those who are not included in society's circles of power because God's love knows no limits.

I would like to end with a French parable. One morning, the sun got up in a bad mood. "I am really tired of getting up every morning and giving light to the earth, day after day," it said. "I'm tired of ripening the corn and melting the snow. What does the human race ever do for me in return? The sun was still thinking all this over, when the rain arrived. "Lady Rain," the sun remarked. "You water the earth all the time and make the flowers grow. You turn the fields green, and fill up the rivers. What does the human race ever do for you in return?" Hearing this, the rain frowned and broke out into terrible noise and fell headlong onto the earth. And as she fell, she pounded out these words. "Listen, Mother Earth. You let humankind work you, rip you open, scratch and scrape you. What does the human race ever do for you in return? The earth murmured to the grain of wheat, "Hey, little grain of wheat. You let yourself die so that humankind can eat bread. What does the human race ever do for you in return? And then the sun stopped shining. The rain stopped falling. The earth stopped holding the grain. The grain stopped germinating. And life disappeared from the face of the earth. Eventually, the sun became bored, because there were no longer any children dancing in its warmth and light. The rain became saddened at never seeing the smile of the gardener. The earth became weary at never hearing the joyful steps of the workers on her back. And the grain of wheat began to rot alone. Together, they decided to have a meeting with God, the creator, and this is what they said to God: "Dear God, everything is dying in this universe that you created to be so good and fruitful. Give back life to the earth, we beg you." And God said, "My friends, I have given you everything you need to support life on earth. Life cannot be born except of you and between you. And life will be born anew if each of you shares of its nature with all creation. For life is born out of a sharing of life. And where cooperation is refused, life cannot be." Amen.