

**“An Affirmation of Where We Are and a Calling to Go Beyond”**

**Matthew 15:21-28**

**Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman**

**First Baptist Church Raleigh**

**August 20, 2017**

I have told some you about a conversation one of my mentors had with a dear lady in a church he served in Virginia many years ago. The woman was upset because he had not preached a clear-cut anti-alcohol sermon. He tried to talk to her about a continuum of behavior, he acknowledged cultural problems related to alcohol abuse and referenced the diversity of biblical material on the subject, to no avail. Finally, he asked the woman what she did with the narrative of John 2. Did she believe Jesus changed water to wine? After a pause, she replied, “Yes, I suppose I do, but it has been an embarrassment to me all of my life!”

Some of us may identify with that woman, while others are inclined to laugh, but all of us have parts of the Bible which embarrass us. All of us can point to passages of scripture we would like to remove from the canon. All of us can name texts which do not square with our worldview or seem to contradict the basic character of God.

In his book *Wishful Thinking* Frederick Buechner lists a few biblical stories which trouble him. In Exodus, God hardens Pharaoh’s heart, then clobbers him for being hard-hearted. In Psalm 137, the hymn writer moves from the poignant image of harps hung up on willows to wishing that God would bash the heads of the enemies’ babies against rocks. In Genesis, Noah, the one man worth saving, God’s blue-eyed sailor, gets drunk in port and passes out.

Last of all, Buechner mentions his struggle with a passage of scripture that always has been on my first-to-go list – the narrative we have read today from Matthew 15. Jesus of Nazareth, the same Jesus who tells a story wherein a Samaritan is the hero, tells a Canaanite woman who comes to him for help that it is not fair to throw the children’s food to dogs. How could Jesus say such a thing? Surely there has been a mistake here! There is something missing from this story or perhaps we will find evidence of a textual variance!

How we wish we could excise the difficult stuff from the canon, but alas we cannot. It is here and we must struggle to understand why, but it has been my experience that, if we struggle long enough with the difficult texts, we will find a redemptive message.

One message the reading from Matthew 15 communicates to the church today is that it is “O.K.” for us to focus some ministry where we are. In an effort to explain Jesus’ behavior, some scholars have noted that, when the Canaanite woman comes for help, Jesus is weary. He has just been confronted by the Pharisees and probably has ventured off his home turf in an effort to get away. As soon as he heals the woman’s daughter, he goes up a mountain to pray.

A part of the story here may be insight into the humanity of Jesus – even he needs some time away. A part of the message for us may be that we can learn from his practice of drawing limits – even Jesus cannot do everything for everybody. But, while these insights into the story may be accurate, they do not explain the content of Jesus’ responses to this woman. Jesus’ Jewishness does.

This story is set within a Jewish world. The action takes place on Gentile turf, in the district of Tyre and Sidon, but the main actor is Jewish. Further, Matthew tells the story for a Jewish audience, or to be more precise, a community of Jewish Christians who are wondering what will become of the Hebrew people. Matthew’s first hearers are living through a time of transition, a time in which their faith in Christ has led to their removal from the synagogues, but a time in which they retain their Jewish identity. For such an audience, Matthew tells a story about a Jewish Jesus who still cares about the Jewish people.

This Jesus says that his mission is directed first to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As the whole of the New Testament makes clear, this is not the sum total of his mission, but this is where Jesus begins. Israel is not abandoned by God in and through Christ, but is offered redemption and healing. In the words of Romans 11, God has by no means rejected God’s people, Israel! Rather, God in Christ lives the life of a Jewish rabbi, teaching and healing among Jewish people. This story affirms the priority in Jesus’ ministry of reaching out to his own.

In the process, it seems to offer a word of affirmation for ministering to people where we are. The story gives us permission to take care of our own. I have heard many discussions in 35 years of ministry about the need for churches to give more to mission causes. And hear me clearly, we should strive to give as much as we can to support worthy causes around the globe, to sustain those who seek to minister in the name and spirit of Christ to people in need everywhere. What disturbs me is that part of the conversation seems to assume that there is something inherently wrong with caring for our own. Jesus begins with the people right around him, he places a priority upon caring for his people. There is a lesson to be learned here.

The lesson is that it is “O.K.” to focus some of our energy on our own. It is “O.K.” to focus energy upon nurturing the children entrusted to us, do everything we can to help form disciples of Jesus who will love and serve the Lord. It is “O.K.” to focus energy on caring for the elderly, see that those who have given so much are not abandoned in their years of wisdom, but are cared for and allowed to contribute in every way possible. It is “O.K.” to sustain pastoral and educational ministries; support music, youth and children’s programs. The message of the biblical story is that it is “O.K.” to minister to our own. In fact, there is something not quite right about ministry which is concerned about people over there, but not people right here.

In the musical *Hair* there is a scene in which a woman confronts the father of her child and asks how he could have left her and the child. “How can people be so heartless?” she asks, “Especially people who care about justice?” The man is silent, for he knows he is guilty. He is, after all, a crusader. He is a person who cares about the needs of the hungry and oppressed. But in his concern for the world, he has ignored people right in front of him. He has neglected his own. So might we if we are not careful. Jesus’ strange actions in Matthew’s disturbing tale point to an important reality we are prone to forget. It is “O.K.” to care for our own, to reach out to people right where we are.

But this is not the only message of the story. The story does not end with Jesus rejecting the woman, but with him affirming her faith and

healing her daughter. In the end, after all the conversation about lost sheep and not giving children's food to dogs, Jesus reaches out to the Gentile mother of a child possessed by a demon and responds as he would to anyone else in need – with compassion.

Thus, for the first listeners, the story affirms the continuing worth of the Jewish people while calling these same people to broaden the horizons of their love. For us, the story affirms our ministry to our own while calling us to go beyond all boundaries established by culture and religion in reaching out in love to all people.

It is a central claim of the Gospel – we are called by God to reach out in love to all people. We catch a glimpse of this truth early on in salvation history as the prophet Isaiah says, “And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord... these I will bring to my holy mountain... for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” We see an example of what this truth means in Matthew 15 as Jesus offers compassion to a Gentile mother of a demon-possessed child. We see the full-blown version in the commission of Matthew 28 wherein followers of Jesus are instructed to make disciples of all nations.

The message is clear. We are called to go into all nations and share the love of God with all people. We are called to transcend all boundaries and address all needs. But, as we know, this is easier said than done. It seems to be a universal human trait that we establish boundaries to divide us from those who are different.

An old issue of the comic strip “Bloom County” illustrates our nature. In the first frame, Opus stands outside a painted line. The Beaver, leader of five characters inside the line, exclaims, “That is your country, this is my country; stay out! We have sabers to rattle!” In frame two, a second individual has been removed from the inner group, as the Beaver exclaims, “And that is your state, this is our state!” “Thanks a lot!” says the rejected party. In frame three, a third individual is cast out with these words, “And that's your town, this is our town!” A small sign reinforces the sentiment, “Our town – bug off!” In the fourth frame, two individuals remain in the inner circle. They communicate their feelings to those less fortunate, “And this is our house! Stay off our property!” Finally, in the last two frames, dissension arises among

the inner two, “Excuse me, you’re in my room!” “Your room?!” says the Beaver, “Now you’re in my personal space!”

It is an illustration of us. We establish our boundaries very carefully: Jew/Gentile, Christian/Muslim, Serb/Croat, Hutu/Tootsie, black/white, rich/poor, male/female, republican/democrat. We draw our circles smaller and smaller until those inside are just like us. We love those inside the lines and refuse to reach out until the word of the Lord comes to us and beckons us to go beyond our limited frames of reference. Sometimes, even when the word comes, we refuse to go.

The tragic events which took place in Charlottesville this past weekend illustrate our condition, and I am talking here just about the events themselves, not the president’s response. Reasonable people can differ as to the most appropriate ways to honor historic figures, but this was not a monument preservation protest. It was advertised as a white supremacy rally, supported by Neo-Nazi’s and the Ku Klux Klan. Even the Friday evening march was filled with anti-Semitic and overtly racist chants, symbols and actions.

While many parties may bear some responsibility for Saturday’s clashes, the assembly itself offers a reminder that the central sin of our nation, the sin of racism, is still a mighty force. We began with the notion that all men are created equal, but what we meant was - all free, white men are created equal, not Native Americans whose land we took, not African Americans we brought as slaves, not any women at all. Over time, we have grown in our understanding, but not all of us have grown equally. Many still cling to old ideas of race, gender and religion.

Yet, despite all of our stubbornness and unwillingness to change, God’s word comes to us again and again, and God’s Spirit continues to work within us until we are molded and shaped into the image of the one who came in the limited human form of a Jewish Rabbi, but grew to reach out to all people with compassion.

In the film “The Crying Game” many boundaries are transcended: black/white, British soldier/IRA terrorist, straight/minority orientation. It is a film which affirms some, angers many and challenges all who view it. It is unsettling because its characters transcend established boundaries. We draw lines in order to make life easier. Life is simpler

if we place everyone in groups, separate the good guys from the bad guys. This movie blurs the lines. People cross boundaries and care for those they are supposed to hate. Yet, unsettling or not, I would suggest that it presents an image of the Gospel. For our calling is to go beyond the barriers which separate people and offer love and compassion to all.

This is not a new message for this church. We began as a biracial community in 1812, were separated by race during the years of Jim Crow, but for the past 50 years have pursued racial reconciliation. We have been a part of interfaith studies in recent years, but as far back as 1945, Broadus Jones invited Rabbi Gelfman from Temple Beth Or to preach from this pulpit. We have had women deacons since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, nurtured WMU pioneers like Fannie Heck and Sallie Bailey Jones, ordained women and considered them equal partners in the Gospel. We have ministered to poor people of all ethnicities and immigrants from all over the world through our clothing ministry and other endeavors. We have sought to love all people and we will continue to do so, not perfectly, but in God's grace, faithfully.

Some of you have read the series of novels written by Jan Karon, beginning with *At Home in Mitford*. They are stories about small-town American life seen through the eyes of an Episcopal rector. I struggle with the view of providence that permeates these novels, but I enjoy them, the characters, the feel of the town. Mayor Esther Cunningham's slogan sums up life, "Mitford Takes Care of Its Own." It is not a bad slogan. Worse could be said of us than to say, "First Baptist Church takes care of its own." But it is not an exhaustive mission for the church nor an adequate description of Mitford. Mitford welcomes outsiders, people who live on the wrong side of the mountain, city slickers who put down roots, even one outsider who finds salvation in an attic.

Mitford presents a reflection of the reign of God and of the story we have read today. The church takes care of its own, but welcomes the stranger, too. It is "O.K." to focus on our people, but our concern must extend beyond all boundaries. Sure, Jesus would say, feed your lost sheep, love those nearest you, but when the stranger comes begging a cure for her child, find a way to address her need.