



“The Outsider”
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
August 21, 2011
Matthew 15:21-28

Last month, Anders Breivik blew up a building in Oslo, then went on a coldblooded shooting spree, killing more than 80 people – most of them teenagers. Before the details surfaced about this individual, the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal and other western publications had the typical spontaneous reaction. They pointed their fingers at radical Islam. Surely that must be the force behind such terrorist violence!

However, as we now know, this madman was not a Muslim, but rather a Christian fundamentalist. He wanted Norway to remain ethnically homogenous and despised the idea that his country would allow people who did not look like him and think like him to become fellow citizens.

Breivik calmly walked through a summer camp for future leaders gunning down young Norwegians because of the dangerous ideology they endorsed. What were these dangerous ideas? Democracy, freedom of religion and respect for every human being.

Fear of the outsider lays the foundation for Us verses Them thinking. Fear of the outsider prompts us to stereotype people of other ethnic groups, nationalities and religions as one-dimensional figures who have nothing in common with us. Us verses Them thinking encourages us to believe that what *we* hold dear is right and true and good, but what *they* believe is dark and devious. We can be trusted, but you’d better keep an eye on them. It is the age-old belief that people who believe as we do are the righteous, but all others are sinners. Such biased, exclusionary thinking has prompted many to run away from people of faith as quickly as their legs will carry them.

Any follower of Christ will tell you that a foundational principle of Christianity is “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Coming from the Old Testament book of Leviticus, it is also a bedrock belief of Judaism. “Love your neighbor as yourself.” However, it is always easier to follow this command in the abstract than to apply it to specific individuals. It is one thing to love your neighbor in theory, and another to love someone who holds different beliefs and hails from foreign territory.

In today’s passage from the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus discovers that this principle applies to him as well as others and his encounter seems to broaden his own understanding of what it really means to love your neighbor.

To set the stage for today's passage, Jesus has been butting heads with the religious leaders over their distortion of Jewish law. After his confrontation, he withdraws to another place. But not just any place. Matthew purposely says that he has gone to the district of Tyre and Sidon, which is the boundary between Jewish and Gentile territory. New Testament scholar, Warren Carter says this "is a place of tension and prejudice" and notes that the first century Jewish historian, Josephus, wrote that the people of Tyre "are our bitterest enemies."¹

As soon as Jesus and his disciples arrive in this foreign land, a woman steps across the boundary line and starts yelling at him. And in case the readers of his gospel did not catch his point by his geographical reference, Matthew makes it clear to them that Jesus has encountered an outsider. He calls her a Canaanite, which is shorthand for Gentile, foreigner, enemy.

The woman shouts, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." Who is this woman and what is she doing in the midst of a group of Jewish men? Is she a widow? Why is she screaming?

If this episode followed the storyline of other encounters Jesus had with people pleading for healing, we would expect Jesus to say something wise and send the girl home healthy. But this story is unlike any other story we find in the gospels. After this Canaanite woman begs Jesus to heal her daughter, Jesus ignores her.

The woman knows Jesus heard her the first time, but since he turned a deaf ear to her plea, she keeps pestering him. Soon, the disciples have had enough and say to Jesus, "She's driving us crazy, get rid of her."

Jesus seems to comply with their request saying, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." In other words, "My mission is to Jews, not Gentiles, so you might as well be on your way."

If I had been that woman, I would have been steamed. "So, you were only sent to the people of Israel. Then, what in the world are you doing in Tyre? There are no Jews here."

But rather than turning sassy, she falls on her knees before Jesus and begs. She says, "Lord, help me."

This is where the passage becomes embarrassing. A mother is pleading for her child and Jesus is not only cold to her request, he insults her. It is so contrary to the picture I have of Jesus that I wouldn't believe it if it were not right here in Scripture. Jesus says to the woman, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

New Testament commentators have tripped all over themselves trying to soften the words of Jesus. Some have suggested that Jesus did not really mean dogs, because he chose a Greek word that can be translated "puppy." That doesn't seem to help much.

I would like to think that if Jesus had insulted me, I would have taken the moral high ground. But the truth is, I probably would have unleashed a barrage of salty words and stomped away. However, this woman doesn't allow anything to knock her off course. She is so determined to help her child that she turns the insult "into an opportunity to lay claim to the mercy of God."² She responds, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

She is down on her knees at his feet; exactly where dogs would be. She's pleading, "Yes, Lord, but my daughter, my daughter! Please, just drop a few crumbs."

Whew! I suspect she rocked Jesus back on his heels. I think she and God partnered to teach Jesus a profound lesson that day, because he changed his tune. He said, "Wow! You possess an amazing faith. Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed.

The only way I can imagine that this story was recorded in the gospels is, if from time to time after this event, Jesus told the story on himself.³ It provides his followers with a powerful example of the necessity of remaining open to God's Spirit and to never stop growing in faith by extending the boundaries of those we are called to love.

There is a Canaanite woman in every community. She is desperate for help. She needs medical care for her daughter. She wants enough food for her family. She needs a job that pays a living wage. She wants her child to attend a decent school.

A colleague in Houston tells of the poor who live in his community and some of the ways his congregation ministers to them. One thing they do is operate a mobile health clinic to meet the needs of those who have no medical insurance and cannot pay for services. Being in southern Texas, a number of the people they serve are Hispanics and some of them are undocumented. His church also partners with other congregations to provide meals for people who are hungry.

He notes that there are strong voices in his city that say some people are not entitled to mercy. They do not deserve medical care or a decent meal or a place to live.

He responds, "These are not questions of issues. These are questions of real people with real lives. People with names. Real people with real disappointments and real dreams."

When their city council convened a town hall meeting to address the growing problem of homelessness in their community, his congregation's mobile health clinic became a flashpoint in the discussion, as did the joint feeding ministry.

At the town hall meeting, a resident of the community spoke against the presence of social service agencies in the neighborhood, and he drew a comparison between providing a meal to homeless people and feeding cattle.

Not only that, there had been a series of articles in the *Houston Chronicle* about an infestation of rats in some downtown parking garages and city parks. Following the publication of the articles, a citizen who was assigned by the city council to work on the Homeless Task Force compared the community's homeless with those rats.⁴

There are many people who, in their fear of those they do not know, cry out, "It's Us against Them. Besides, they're just dogs. Cattle. Rats. They're not really people."

There are many who withhold mercy and draw strict limits on their compassion. But the command to love our neighbor cannot be restricted to loving only those with whom we have much in common. We are to see each person as a child of God. It is a difficult, yet vital lesson to learn. Just ask Jesus.

NOTES

1. Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005), p.321.
2. Cynthia M. Campbell, "Crumbs," August 18, 2002.
3. Ibid.
4. William Blake Rider, "Who Gets to Enter the Temple?" on *Day1* website, November 19, 2006.