

“Bounding over Boundaries”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
September 5, 2021 – Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 18
James 2:1-17; Mark 7:24-37

This morning, as I drove here from where I live in neighboring Reading, I was greeted at the town line, as I am each day, with a sign welcoming me to this lovely town of Stoneham. Had there not been a sign, I may not have known that I had moved into a different place as there is much that looks kind of the same from one town the next here in the suburbs north of Boston. Of course, there is much that differs from town to town, with one town perhaps having a superior high school football team and another with more delicious bagels. There are many characteristics of our different communities that make each of them unique and special. Some of the differences are minor and not that noticeable. The differences from community to community are more pronounced and recognizable when going from one state to another or one region to another, especially when the different regions have totally different cultures, as they do between New England and Quebec to the north of us.

One of the wonderful things about traveling to different regions, which in some cases doesn't require a very long trip at all, is experiencing and enjoying the different cultures that exist in different places. In today's gospel lesson, we read about Jesus doing just this. For some reason, we're not told why, he traveled from his home region of Galilee, in the northern reaches of Judea, to somewhere near Tyre in the neighboring region of Syria. After having spent some time ministering all around Galilee, perhaps he made his way across the border because he needed a little r-n-r time away from the busy work of teaching and healing. Whatever the reason, he crossed regional and cultural boundaries, and located himself in a foreign, Gentile land.

It was there that he had an encounter with a local that, I believe, changed him. A Gentile woman of the region came to him, desperately seeking for him to heal her daughter, who was ill with what is described as an unclean spirit. Just as Jesus had crossed boundaries to just be in the region of Tyre, she crossed boundaries to be in his presence, as it was neither culturally common for unfamiliar women and

men to address one another nor for Jews and Gentiles to do so. In this encounter, there was also likely the crossing of other social boundaries between Syrophenician woman, who was likely wealthy as many were in this very prosperous region by Mediterranean Sea, bowed before a homeless, miracle-working vagabond from a lowly, neighboring land (remember, one of Jesus' own disciples once dissed him by asking, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" [John 1:46]). He would have been considered by many to be but a Jewish hillbilly from rural, Podunk Nazareth in Galilee; regardless, this wealthy Gentile woman, with the bold, fearless, unstoppable love of a mother, humbly bowed down in desperation and begged for his help.

His attitude and response to her demonstrated that he was indeed a fully-human product of his own culture. It seems out of character for divine Jesus, whose message was that we must love our neighbor, to respond the way that he did, with an insult, but that is exactly what happened. He came into the region of Tyre carrying ideas that he grew up with, that his own people were the beloved children of God, and that others, who did not have God's Law and did not follow God's ways, were beneath them, being but dogs. The loving mother's humble but forceful response to this insult, by stating that even those considered dogs are loved and nourished by God, was a lesson that taught Jesus and moved him to act and to change. In responding by healing her daughter, his mission to serve the children of Israel was expanded to being a mission to serve all of God's children. I believe that Jesus' own worldview was expanded by this encounter as well, that he not only healed the other, but was himself changed and made more whole as his active love for the other grew.

Jesus changed and grew throughout his lifetime. We are told in the gospel of Luke that as a younger person "he grew in wisdom, stature, and in favor with God and people" (Luke 2:52). As an adult, he grew when he left the comforts of home and the woodshop to travel around and teach and heal people. And he grew when he himself bounded over boundaries and included those who had been considered to be excluded from the grace of God in receiving his gifts of healing and renewal. When, in Tyre, he practiced love for this foreigner, he grew again, becoming a better practitioner of what his brother James calls the "royal law" of loving one's neighbor without partiality.

This is our path as well. We, as followers of Jesus, are to be on a path of growth in our love for others throughout our lifetimes. Thank God we are able to do so. With God's merciful and forgiving lovingkindness upon us and the empowering Spirit of God dwelling within us, we are able to move beyond the ways of our youth or our own cultural limitations, bounding over the boundaries that have been set around us, to become more of what God wants us to be. We are never so hopelessly stuck in the mire of our old ways of thinking and being that we are unable to move beyond them to new and better ways. This is often not easy, and sometimes it takes the support of a loving community, but we can grow as people and a people. We can be unbound by destructive ways that have dominated us.

So, this Labor Day weekend and beyond, may our labor ever be bounding over boundaries to be more loving, more welcoming, more unbound, and more whole. Amen.