

## Insiders and Outsiders

Romans 11:1-6, 29-32      Crossroads Christian Church  
Matthew 15:21-28          August 17, 2014 Pent 10A

I finished writing my sermon before we began our vacation last week, and before one of the more stressful weeks in St Louis area history began with the officer-involved shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson a week ago yesterday. We live 2-3 miles from downtown Ferguson and from the scene of the shooting, and the scene of the riots. We have shopped in some of the stores that were looted. We heard way too many sirens last week. Because of the stress, we canceled our 3-day out-of-town trip and took two day trips instead. It was still a good week off, but some of our enjoyment was tempered by our sorrow over what was going on.

As I looked at my sermon, on how the world tends to be divided between insiders and outsiders, and how Jesus Christ attempts to break down that division, I realized that to preach on that subject and not mention the last week's events just wouldn't work, at least for me.

First of all, let me say that Ferguson is a community that has worked hard at being a successful interracial community. By and large, people of different races get along well there, and there are many successful black-owned businesses there, in addition to white-owned businesses.

However, there has been and is tension between the predominantly white police and the African-American community. We've had experience through our own interracial children of unequal treatment and driving-while-black citations. So we can understand some of the sense of rage and injustice that has fueled the protests.

Most of the police, I believe, are fair and do their best, but there's still a sense of mutual distrust between local blacks and the police. But the shooting wasn't done by "the police," it was by one officer under stress whose actions may or may not have been justifiable. That's up to the investigators and the courts to decide.

The rioting last Sunday night was mostly brought about by trouble-makers and opportunists who didn't even live in or near Ferguson, but who came to take advantage of a volatile situation for their own gain—as Michael Brown's parents said, the looters were disrespecting the death of their son. It breaks our hearts to see the damage they caused, both the physical damage and the damage to race relations and to the reputation of the town.

It was in such a conflicted world that Jesus came, filled with prejudices, mixed motives, suppression, and anger between classes and nations. Was it naïve for him to hope that such barriers could be broken down, that God's all-inclusive love could draw us together? Many times the looters and riot squads would seem to say yes, it's naïve and hopeless. But Jesus still calls us to be one in the Spirit. So here's the sermon I wrote over a week ago.

It's easy for many of us, and sometimes painful, to recall times when we've been outsiders, when we felt out of place, a stranger in a strange land. About thirty years ago, I traveled to Germany on work-related business. At the end of the meeting, where we had known each other and all spoke English, I took a few days extra to travel in Germany and Holland. It was a strange feeling, not to know the language, to be a functional illiterate, because I

couldn't even read the signs. I knew Dammen and Herren, so I wouldn't go into the wrong rest room, but that was about it! It was a good experience, and the people were friendly and helpful, but I certainly knew that I didn't belong there. And I was just there for a few days. It makes me appreciate our immigrant ancestors who came over into our country years ago, strangers in a strange land, and who weren't just weekend tourists, but who had the courage to come and make new lives for themselves.

Many of us know what it's like to be the new kid in school, or a member of the out-group, or the new employee at work, to be outsiders. And we also know what it is like to be insiders, to be part of the group, and to be suspicious of those who aren't just like us.

Both of our scripture texts today explore what it is like to be outsiders and insiders. They help us understand what God wants of us today. They both help us remember the truth of Edwin Markham's poem, "He drew a circle and drew me out, heretic, rebel, thing to flout. But love and I had the wit to win. We drew a circle and drew him in." But neither text gives us pat answers or easy answers.

At first glance, our Gospel lesson seems harsh. It doesn't sound in character for Jesus. Usually we picture Jesus as compassionate for all the world's outcasts, as one who reached out in love to all around him. In Luke's gospel, he got in trouble right in the beginning of his ministry when he preached at his own hometown synagogue. He pointed out to the home team that God's grace and mercy had been extended towards Gentiles—the Syrian general Naaman who was healed of leprosy, and the widow of Zorababbel, who showed hospitality to

Elijah the prophet. He tried to widen their vision, and they didn't like it very much.

So why in today's Gospel story did Jesus seem so harsh, so unwelcoming to a foreigner? Let's put the story in context. Jesus had been having a hard time in Galilee. Religious and political enemies alike were threatening this new movement. So he and the disciples had crossed a border, going north toward two old pagan cities, Tyre and Sidon. There a woman comes up to him—a woman from a pagan culture. But she speaks to Jesus in the language of faith. "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David, my daughter is severely possessed by a demon." She believes in Jesus. She knows he is sent from God. And she believes he can help her. Earlier when another Gentile had come to Jesus asking for help to heal his child, Jesus didn't hesitate.

But this time, Jesus flat out ignores the woman. He pretends she isn't there. Now that was a normal reaction for a Jewish man of the time being approached by a woman, especially a pagan woman, but it doesn't seem normal for Jesus. The woman pleads her case again, desperate to save her child. And Jesus, seemingly, insults her. "Why waste the children's food on dogs?" He goes on to explain that his mission is to the lost sheep of Israel, not to people like her. Jesus had been interrupted before by other women, by other Gentiles, and he had acted compassionate. But not now.

The woman is persistent, and humble. She accepts Jesus' terms and puts a clever twist on them. "Lord, even the little puppy dogs under the table get the children's crumbs." God's bounty, God's love is enough for everyone, not just for Jewish males. And that did it. Her persistence, her faith, her love for her child, got through

to Jesus. He marveled at her faith, and he healed the child.

So what happened? Elton Trueblood, a great Quaker preacher, wrote a book called *The Humor of Christ*. There he offered the suggestion that even though Jesus was speaking arrogant-sounding words, maybe he said them with a glint of humor and compassion in his eye, but in a gentler way than it sounded. Perhaps he was aware that he himself was an outsider speaking to another outsider. The Bible doesn't tell us the tone of voice, just the words. Others say that Jesus was testing the woman's faith and determination. One preacher just said that Jesus had been having a really bad day and she had gotten on his last nerve. Yet another preacher, Caris Cerdwyn, put it into a poem she calls "The Bigger Picture."

Persistent

Bold, Annoying.

Who does she think she is?

She was the lowest of the low.

He went on his way

ignored the pleas

Acted as though she was not there.

The men around him were impatient

irritated that she wouldn't leave them alone

she just kept begging

asking for what she so desperately needed

asking for what truly was fair.

It wasn't simply a desire

No this was a terrible way of life

living in torment

living in fire  
A girl, her girl  
Her daughter, beloved  
lower than she on the social ladder,  
Was possessed of an evil spirit  
a demon, no rest  
little silence.

How did it manifest?  
Did she have seizures?  
Did she scream and cry  
and hurt herself?

Why was Jesus ignoring the woman?  
He finally told her.  
"I was called for the lost sheep of  
Israel."

And she kept begging.  
And he said "It wasn't right to throw  
the children's bread to the dogs..."

She could have, even should have  
gotten angry at the words,  
the arrogance implied  
But she was desperate.  
"Even the dogs can eat the  
crumbs...the leftovers from the table."  
she replied.

And his eyes met hers, and he saw the cosmos.  
And he heard Spirit's voice there in her voice,  
saw the bigger picture

heard the bigger story  
stepped into bigger shoes.

She made room for the whole of the world  
no more small picture  
no more Jew and Greek, Male and Female  
more people, more perspectives  
more lives, more truth.

Unnamed, but forever known  
in the story of this man,  
this healer  
this story teller,  
this rabble rouser  
from Nazareth.

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For whatever reason, something significant happened. A wall was torn down. A bridge was built. A stereotype was smashed. A woman in her need found help from Jesus Christ. And for us, this is terribly, terribly important, because we are the Gentile dogs. We are the outsiders. The little story tells us of one step toward extending the mission of Christ to the whole world. It shows us that God's love and compassion, Christ's love and compassion, is not limited to those with the right credentials, the right background.

We were outsiders, and God, through Jesus Christ, has welcomed us inside. We didn't make it on our own. It was grace, through and through, amazing grace. In Matthew's gospel, Jews were insiders and Gentiles were outsiders. In our Epistle lesson, St. Paul is struggling, trying to make sense out of why most Jewish people in

his day weren't accepting or receiving the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Did that mean that since they were rejecting Christ they were rejecting God, and that God was rejecting them? You can hear people in many pulpits who say yes to that. But Paul knew that such a thought was wrong. It's that kind of thinking that led to the kind of vicious anti-Semitism that led to the concentration camps and gas chambers of World War II.

Paul wrote out of an inner struggle with his own background. Were the Gentiles now insiders and the Jews now outsiders? By no means. God didn't abandon the covenant that he had made with the Jews, but had given a new covenant to reach out beyond the Jewish people, a Covenant without boundaries. The Old Covenant is not an expired Covenant. No, the Jewish people today are still God's children, and we need to remember that, and honor the integrity of their own faith. The two passages together tell us to be very, very cautious about labeling other people as outsiders because they are not like us. It's all too human to divide the world into us and them, to pass judgment on people who are different than us. The scriptures challenge us at our points of prejudice. Even people that we don't like are God's children and deserve to be treated as such. The scriptures challenge us to be welcome and inviting to all who would come and worship here, to help outsiders become insiders. Also, they challenge us to spread the good news to others, people we might otherwise overlook—the poor, the weak, the outcast, the powerless, the despised. Remember the parable of the Last Judgment in Matthew 26? The sheep, the insiders, those on their way to Heaven were the people who ministered to Christ by ministering to the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick the

imprisoned. The goats, the outsiders, were those who were properly religious but ignored Christ by ignoring those in need. May God give us the vision, the compassion, and the humility to bless and welcome those who are outside, inside. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

