

“Widening the Circle of Who’s In”

Date: August 14, 2011

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Matthew 15:21-28

Occasion: Pentecost 14, year A

Theme: Inclusiveness; humility; faith

C.S. Lewis once wrote an essay entitled “The Inner Ring.” He says in the article that on any playground or in any office or church, there are little groups, or rings of people who are on the “inside.” And then, there are those who aren’t: those who don’t get picked at play time, those who eat alone in the lunch room.

Lewis says that the existence of such rings is not necessarily bad. We’re finite human beings, and we can only have deeply intimate relationships with a limited number of people. But, he says that the desire to gain status or self-worth by being part of an “inner ring” is deeply destructive.

It causes you to constantly compare yourself with others, to feel anguish when you’re left out, and deeper anguish when someone close to you gets let in. Worst of all, once you’re in, you want to keep others out, because it’s the exclusive nature of the group that makes you feel good.

Jesus came to tell us and to show us, it is God’s desire to bring into the inner ring of His love, anyone who will come. The ministry of Jesus Christ is not about keeping people out. Its about widening the circle of who’s in. One of the most intriguing stories about who is in, is this one in Matthew 15:21-28.

It happened one day when Jesus was walking by the sparkling waters of the Mediterranean. It was in the vicinity of Tyre and Sidon, communities of ancient Phoenicia. A woman who resided in that Gentile area, a non-jew herself, came rushing out to speak with the Master.

The plaintive tone of her voice, the concerned look on her face, revealed a hint of desperation. “Have mercy on me, O Lord,” she cried. “My daughter is severely possessed by a demon.” What the woman meant, we do not know precisely. It might have been that her daughter had epilepsy. When epileptics had seizures in those days, it was believed that they were possessed by demons. Whatever the nature of her daughter’s suffering, the mother naturally wanted help for her.

And what was Jesus’ response to the mother? Silence. “He did not answer her a word,” writes Matthew. For some reason the woman’s request left Jesus speechless for a moment. I wonder why. Was he testing her faith? Did he think her request out of line? I don’t think so. I hardly think that a mother asking help for her daughter was an outrageous request.

A close study reveals that Jesus appears to be contemplating, what his role should be in regard to the Gentiles. At this stage of his ministry, Jesus was apparently most concerned about gathering Jews rather than Gentiles as his followers. The ministry to the Gentiles would come later, but right now his focus was on the Jews.

Therefore he said to the woman, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Maybe he thought that only the Jews could truly understand his role as Messiah. So, he would proclaim his message of God’s love to the Jews first.

But the woman was persistent. She kept begging and crying out to him. In fact she annoyed his disciples with her noisy petitions. “Send her away,” they said, “for she is crying after us.” But Jesus didn’t send her away, and the woman wasn’t going away. She in fact became all the more insistent that Jesus listen to her and fulfill her request. She even knelt down before him in humility and cried, “Lord,

help me.”

Now come some of the most puzzling words ever to fall from the lips of Jesus. He said to the woman, “It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” That does not sound like the Jesus I have come to know. What is going on here?

Some have said he was simply teasing her. Instead of using the derogatory word *dogs* like some of the Jews used against the Samaritans, Jesus used the word *puppies*, a gentle suggestion that she was an outsider. Other scholars have said that Jesus was testing her faith. A little word-play to see how strongly she desired what she asked.

And still others think that Jesus was still pondering within himself whether his mission should be extended to the Gentile world. I find myself in this camp. I think Jesus was pondering the boundaries of his mission. How wide was the kingdom of God to be? It was starting with God’s chosen people, the Jews. But was the world ready for the message that Christ was bringing to it?

Whatever the reason for Jesus’ words, she would not be put off. She had a great come-back to Jesus’ comment about not throwing the children’s bread to the dogs. She herself had a witty statement. “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

What a sharp mind this woman had. What a great wit to have such a wonderful come-back. And what persistence! She kept going to the Lord with her request, no matter what. Her perseverance was relentless. And Jesus was impressed. “Oh, woman. How great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.”

How impressed Jesus was with this mother’s faith. She had no doubt that Jesus could meet her needs. She trusted him to come through for her, and to grant

her request. She doggedly stayed with Jesus until her need was met. We can learn from that woman, can we not? When our prayers are not being answered quickly, we must stay with God in prayer, have faith, and not give up.

Jesus, though he hesitated, he did grant the request of the Canaanite woman. And God's love was spread to an even wider audience. You see, God's love is not meant for an inner circle. God's love is meant for anyone who will receive it. And that means that we must not judge another person by their appearance. Jesus died for all, not just for an inner circle.

A story. A family of five was enjoying their day at the beach. The children were playing in the ocean and making sand castles, when off in the distance a little old lady appeared. Her grey hair blowing in the wind, and her clothes were dirty and ragged. She was muttering to herself as she picked up things from the beach and put them into a bag. The parents called to their children and told them to stay away from the old lady.

As she passed by, bending down every now and then to pick something up, the older woman smiled at the family. But her greeting wasn't returned.

A couple of weeks later, this family learned that the little old lady was a retired school teacher, who had made it her lifelong crusade to pick up bits of glass from the beach, so that children wouldn't cut their feet. And as she picked up broken glass, she prayed for the people who had dropped it, even if she didn't know who they were.

Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, gave his life on the cross so that we might know the love and acceptance of our God. Jesus died for each of us personally. We can't look at another human being without thinking to ourselves, "Jesus died for them too." We do a great dis-service when we jump to conclusions about people

because of how they look, where they live or the type of work that they do.

Look around. I wonder who's missing from our church? People of a certain age group? People of a certain income bracket? People with certain challenges? Or, people who look a certain way. Jesus came to widen the circle of God's love. That should be a part of our mission and ministry as well. Widening the circle, practicing radical hospitality, until all feel welcome. Let us pray.