



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR  
THE TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 15A, AUGUST 20, 2023  
ISAIAH 56:1,6-8; PSALM 67; ROMANS 11:1-2,29-32; MATTHEW 15:10-28

## BOUNDARY-DROPPING WORK



**Matthew 15:10-19, 21-28** [Jesus called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” Then the disciples approached and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?” He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.” But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.” Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.” Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting

*after us.” He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.]*

Scholars generally agree that no one is really sure what Jesus is up to in this brief encounter with the Canaanite woman. But that doesn’t mean we can’t glean something still. This Jesus is neither the one we’ve come to know in the gospel, nor is he particularly likeable given what he says to the woman here. It’s downright offensive and mean. Like Peter, we are saying, Jesus, explain yourself!

Some suggest this interaction is evidence that Jesus had his heart turned in the moment by the woman’s persistence, and by extrapolation invites us to consider how God is open to a change of heart as well. There are other places in scripture where God seems to change God’s mind, and that make for an interesting theological reflection.

Others suggest that Jesus is making a point for the disciples by using the stark example of initially keeping a hateful boundary that holds the woman as unclean, only to let that boundary fall away as he commends her for her faith and provides healing for her child. But this feels exploitative of the woman, so what do we do with that?

We cannot be sure, but what is key is to understand what precedes this passage, and place this encounter in that context.<sup>11</sup> Having just walked on water and stilled the storm, as we heard last week, Jesus went to Gennesaret

where the religious leaders are assailing him with questions about eating with unwashed hands. He says it’s not what goes into the person that defiles, but what comes out. That is, what is in one’s heart that causes them to speak and act in ways that defile and do damage.

From Gennesaret Jesus goes directly to the region of Tyre and Sidon—that is, to the region of their ancient enemies, the Philistines. Remember David and Goliath? These are people despised because centuries of hatred have codified such enmity.

Yet Jesus goes there, immediately after addressing how purity is misunderstood and misapplied—he goes there and engages not just a dirty, wretched Canaanite, but a woman, and a woman whose daughter has a demon. If you’re keeping score, that three strikes against her according to code. Purity laws have rendered her untouchable, and the disciples want Jesus to send her away, but he curiously doesn’t. Perhaps that’s a clue that he is up to something here.

She kneels before him, addresses him with accolades and divine attributes, and begs him to heal her daughter. How vulnerable she is!

He initially says he came to feed the children of Israel, not the dogs. But she persists, and Jesus commends her for her faith and her

persistence that arises from it. Her plea is granted.

This is not an inconsequential interaction. In it, her expression of discipleship, her witness to Jesus' true identity, her faith in him as healer, her desire to engage him, her persistence despite the persecutorial language directed at her—this becomes a model of discipleship even as the disciples look on, surely stunned by it all. They are all from the house of Israel, men, and not dealing with demons, and yet she is the model of faith set before them, and us.

The boundaries are broken for a purpose, and what will become the Christian movement is not confined to the children of Israel, but the movement will embrace all nations, literally all peoples. Impurity in Jesus' calculus need no longer be defined by artificial borders or by ethnic or cultural or gender boundaries, but by what is in one's heart.

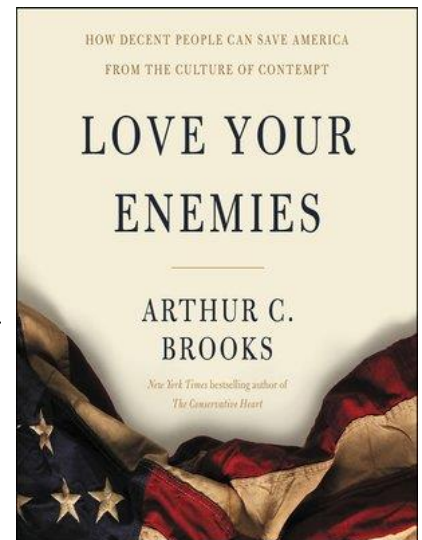
Two weeks ago, Kathy and I made a brief trip to Arkansas to bury a beloved aunt. It was the first time we had seen several extended family members since 2015, when we buried my mother in the adjacent grave. It was good to see these relatives, but there was a tension in our interactions. Everyone was polite, but it was awkward. We think it was because our worldview is so very different from theirs. We bear something of a black sheep air to them—why would we choose to live in a liberal city like Seattle.

They cannot understand why we love and wholly accept and embrace a queer daughter and her family, and delight in doing so. Or why I would work at a church where inclusion is a cherished value. I could go on, but you get the idea, we see the world differently. We are Christian, but interpret the gospel very differently. We felt the judgment, and the boundary was palpably uncomfortable.

I suspect they'd feel something similar if they visited us here.

I'm reading a book currently by A.C. Brooks, a Harvard Business School professor and conservative think tank leader who lives in Washington, DC, but was raised in Seattle by liberal parents. The title of the book, which was recommended to me, and I'd recommend to

you, is *Love Your Enemies: How Decent People Can Save America from The Culture of Contempt.*<sup>iii</sup>



Folks, it is not an exaggeration to say our nation is in crisis. A crisis of social ills, a crisis of democracy, a crisis of climate change, a crisis of contemptible boundary-setting that Brooks suggests is all part of an “outrage industrial complex” intent on setting

American against American. It's working. It is an insidious culture of contempt in which screaming heads convince us that the one with whom we disagree must be deemed not just wrong, but worthless and defective. Unclean. That the way out of this morass is to yell louder, hate harder, and despise more fiercely. It's not working.

Brooks' proposed solutions are rather unconventional for our time. He says we shouldn't try to agree more—mushy moderation is not going to help us. Civility and tolerance are low standards—just playing nice till we can return to our side of the battlefield won't really change anything.

He cites neuroscience and sociological research to coalesce around the guiding principle to get us out of this mess. The solution, he says, is: love your enemies. Not a

novel idea, but radical nevertheless, and when practiced, the science suggests that those who do so are more joyful, healthier, and better leaders in the midst of conflict. And God knows we need these right now!

Friends, this is what we, the Church, the Body of Christ, have to offer into the crisis. Love your enemies, and resist the culture of contempt. If we can muster the courage and resolve to do so, it will make a difference—in our own lives, and in this time. We have tough days ahead, to be sure, but let us make our way together, modeling what it means to be disciples of Jesus, like the Canaanite woman who persisted. If Jesus can have his heart turned, maybe we can too, and others as well.

Let it be so.



SAINT MARK'S  
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

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<sup>i</sup>Crumbs of Love by Michael Cook, 2008, <https://disabilityandfaith.org/a-just-appeal-the-mother-who-confronts-jesus/>

<sup>ii</sup> This line of thought is drawn from an essay by Karoline Lewis [https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2008-08/boundless-discipleship?code=OFAbzZREJlTrODmTOPt&utm\\_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm\\_campaign=1e3c9ac6cd-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_SCFREE\\_2023-08-14&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_a11c3b8de1-%5BLIST\\_EMAIL\\_ID%5D](https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2008-08/boundless-discipleship?code=OFAbzZREJlTrODmTOPt&utm_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm_campaign=1e3c9ac6cd-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_SCFREE_2023-08-14&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_a11c3b8de1-%5BLIST_EMAIL_ID%5D)

<sup>iii</sup> For a review of his book, see <https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num>