



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Spiraling Out

SCRIPTURE:
Matthew 15:
10-28

Nov. 26, 2023 — Sermon by guest preacher Rev. Caroline Barnett

Today's gospel reading ends with one of the more complicated stories we have about Jesus. A lot happens in the eighteen verses we just read—some of it is a little confusing—but the story sort of spirals out of control and we end up in a situation where Jesus meets a woman, who is not of the same ethnic group as he, and she approaches him in hopes that he will heal her daughter. And it's complicated and confusing because Jesus doesn't act like we hope he would. At first, he ignores her completely. But she is persistent, unwilling to leave without this miracle, so finally, he can't ignore her any longer.

But his response doesn't offer compassion. Instead, he explains to her that he's here to minister to the house of Israel, the people of his own community. Put bluntly, Jesus tells her, "no." The children he cares for are his own people, and she—this woman and her sick daughter—they are "dogs."

We can't know the true intent behind his words, but from where I'm standing, it appears that Jesus doesn't see the need to reach out past his own circle to help someone. And to add insult to injury, he compares her to an animal begging for scraps.

This is not the Jesus I know and love. This is not the Jesus who eats dinner with outcasts, offers healing without reservation. This is not the Jesus who upsets the social hierarchy in order to do what is right. This does not sound like the Jesus who challenges people to consider who their neighbors are and what it means to love all of God's children. This Jesus is flawed, perhaps a little selfish, maybe even prejudiced, and he wants to keep the miracles of God inside his own community. How did we end up here?

The answer may surprise you. Because what kicks off this story, before it spirals out of control, has nothing to do with healing or Canaanite women. We start with a discussion about whether or not you wash your hands before you eat.

We didn't read them, but in the verses just before our story starts, the Pharisees—who are religious leaders and Jesus' contemporaries—are frustrated that Jesus' disciples do not wash their hands before they sit down to dinner. For them, it's not just a question of personal hygiene. Being clean or unclean is a matter of tradition—of following the practices and rituals of a community. In some ways, it is a sign of belonging to a certain group.

So the Pharisees see the disciples not following this specific tradition and they say: These people, they are not clean, they are not following our traditions. They are not acting as if they are a part of us. But Jesus doesn't see it that way. And he reminds the Pharisees that practices and ritual might be important, but only when they are coupled with good intention, compassion and care for one another.

It's not that not washing your hands before you eat will defile you, it's that if you use your hands for violence or hurt or betrayal, you are defiled and not acting in a way follows the tradition God sets before them. So it's a bit of a shock then, that after his beautiful words about acting with good intention and compassion, Jesus doesn't seem to want to follow through on them.

He repeats the mistakes of the Pharisees, seeing things in stark terms. Only this time, it's not clean versus unclean but Israelite versus Canaanite, child versus dog. In versus out.

It seems that when the Pharisees drew the circle of who is 'in' and who is 'out,' the Jesus of

this story widened the circle a little bit, but not enough to include this Canaanite woman and her child.

There are circles everywhere we look in this story. The Pharisees had their circles. The disciples did and apparently, so did Jesus. And of course, so do we. Whether we draw them intentionally or not, whether we are aware of them or not, we all have circles of who we think is in and who is out. Who is like us and who is... not.

The Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber grew up in a fundamentalist community that had its own circles. As a child, Nadia was taught that her community was inside the circle, and therefore loved by God, and everyone else was not. It didn't sit right with Nadia and she left that way of religion, she left that circle, and eventually found a home in the Lutheran church where she's made a name for herself preaching a message of good news for all people—especially people who have been excluded from Church circles. She believes wholeheartedly that God's grace is freely given to all people, without reservation, but old habits die hard.

Though Nadia has found a community that fits her more open and inclusive theology, she admits that from time to time—especially when she is frustrated—she still sees the world in terms of tightly-drawn circles. Where one circle is good and another is bad.

And sometimes she has a tendency to believe that God uses the same sorting system as she does. Where some people are good and deserving and some people are bad. And isn't it convenient that the "good people" always end up being the people we like? But, just as a friend tells Nadia, the truth is that "every time we draw a line between us and others, Jesus is always on the other side."¹

So when this Jesus—this Jesus who feels comfortable being inside one circle and not in another—denies this woman a healing, it's up to her to remind him that even though he doesn't realize it yet, they're actually on the same side. Because this woman has faith. She trusts in the promises

of God; she believes that Jesus can and will heal her daughter, even when Jesus himself doesn't, so she doesn't let him keep her at arm's length. She says: I heard what you said, but you should heal my child anyways. I deserve to belong. And suddenly that tightly-bound circle that kept the Pharisees, the disciples and Jesus inside and the woman and her daughter on the outside is broken open into an unending spiral of grace.

Just as this story, which started out with a question about hand washing, spirals more and more out of control, God's grace spirals out with it—including more and more people within the reach of God's love. And despite the circles we live in, despite the ways we try to keep neat and orderly boundaries, God doesn't fit into any one circle. Instead, God turns our confined and closed-off circles into expansive and unending spirals that lead us closer and closer to Christ. And it is often the people *outside* the circles—those most marginalized and disrespected—who can see most clearly what all God's power and grace can do.

The woman in this story doesn't have a lot of power. She is never called by her name, known only by the things that mean she is considered less than someone like Jesus. But still, she demands that Jesus open up the circle to include her daughter and it is a testament to the type of savior we follow that he listens to a woman of a different ethnic group, corrects his mistake and stands by her side.

The world is full of circles and it is unfortunate that the Church is too. All too often, people are made to feel like they are not a part of God's spiraling love, but instead told they fall outside a circle of belonging. Whether it is because of the way they look or think, how they act or who they love. Or a matter of birthplace or wealth or social standing, too many are told by churches, "You do not belong here and therefore you do not belong to God."

Perhaps, some of us have felt this way before. Maybe there are times we have been pushed outside the circle. And maybe there have been

1 Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Patrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner and Saint*, 2013, p. 57.

moments when we are the ones drawing the lines. Because, for as much unpacking this story about Jesus needs, the dynamics and emotions of this story feel far too familiar. We live in a different time, a different place, but are we not just as committed to our human boundaries and divisions? Just like Jesus, we easily let insults fall from our mouths, words meant to wound and keep others at a distance, and it feels like, more often than not, humans will do anything to hoard things like mercy, grace and justice in our own closed-off communities.

So what a gift it is, that we have this complicated story where someone breaks open the circle and lets love spiral out. This Canaanite woman who, despite being called a dog rather than a child, despite being told she does not be-

long, this woman refuses to believe in anything less than the transformative power of Christ that is for anyone and everyone. No exceptions.

She believes in it so much that she is willing to cross the boundaries of ethnicity, culture, gender and religion to confront Jesus and remind him of the good news he embodies: That God's love and justice and power cannot be bound by human limitations.

When no one else can see it, she knows that the circles we draw to keep people out are just lines in the sand—easily erased and redrawn. Lines that can be broken open and re-formed to look more like an unending and expansive spiral that reaches out to each and every one of us and draws us back to the center's of God's love.

Thanks be to God, Amen.