

The Boundaries of Love

August 16, 2026

There is something a little strange about preaching outside. Usually, when we gather for worship, we have walls around us. We know where the sanctuary ends and the world begins. The doors tell us when we have arrived. The windows give us something to look through. And, perhaps without even realizing it, the walls can give us a little sense of control over what happens here.

Today, we don't have those walls. Today, we are worshipping out here in the middle of our neighborhood which means that the world we are talking about in church is also the world sitting right around us.

And perhaps that's not such a bad thing.

Because our Gospel lesson today is about what happens when our faith encounters people and circumstances that are not nearly as tidy as we might prefer. Jesus begins this passage by saying something that I think is enormously important: "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles, but it is what comes out of the mouth." In other words, holiness isn't primarily about keeping ourselves uncontaminated. It's not about making sure we have the right people around us, the right boundaries, the right rules, the right credentials. Jesus says: Pay attention to what comes out of you. Because what comes out of us tells us something about what is going on inside of us.

What's wild is that then Matthew immediately gives us a story in which Jesus himself says something deeply troubling. A Canaanite woman comes to him begging for help for her daughter. She cries out. Jesus doesn't answer her. The disciples want her gone because she's making too much noise. Jesus tells her that his mission is not for people like her. And when she persists, he compares her to a dog. There is no way around it. Jesus says something ugly. He's out and out racist.

I'll be honest, one of the things I love about this story is that Matthew doesn't clean it up for us. He doesn't give us a footnote saying, "What Jesus really meant was..." He doesn't reshape the story to make it sound like the woman misunderstood Jesus. He doesn't make Jesus immediately apologize. The story just sits there. Jesus says something that reveals a preconceived notion he has, a boundary about who belongs, who matters, who is worthy of attention.

But then something remarkable happens. The woman talks back. She refuses to accept Jesus' bigotry. She insists that God's abundance is bigger than the limits Jesus has just described. And Jesus listens. Jesus changes, saying "Woman, great is your faith!" And her daughter is healed.

One of the great possibilities in this strange, uncomfortable story is that Jesus is not the only teacher in the room. The Canaanite woman teaches Jesus something. She teaches him that the love of God is larger than the boundaries he thought defined his mission. And if Jesus can be open to learning from someone he initially regarded as outside the circle, what if the lesson here is that we are called to widen our circle, too.

Because that is one of the hardest things about faith. It is easy to believe that we are people who welcome others. It's harder to discover that sometimes the person we are welcoming is going to

challenge us. Sometimes the person we think needs to learn something from us is the person who has something to teach us. Sometimes the person whose presence makes us uncomfortable is precisely the person through whom God is trying to expand our understanding of God's love.

All of this brings me to something that happened across the street this week. Some of our neighbors called a meeting in St. James Park because they were concerned about what they described as the "homeless problem" in the park. Several of us from Union went. It was, to put it mildly, a difficult conversation. There were strong feelings. There was anger. There were things said about unhoused people that were painful to hear. At one point, I was called a despicable excuse for a human being. It was tense, as people were talking past one another rather than to one another.

But there were also moments when people spoke honestly about their experiences and their fears. There was an unhoused man who spoke eloquently about what the park means to him. He talked about playing cards there, charging his phone, and having a place to be. He talked about wanting to be a good neighbor himself. I found myself thinking about this Gospel story. Not because any of us are Jesus. And not because any one person at that meeting is the Canaanite woman. But because the question underneath both stories is the same: Who gets heard? Who gets to speak before we decide what they are? Who gets to tell us who they are, rather than having a stereotype assigned to them?

The Canaanite woman arrives in the story already wearing the equivalent of an identity badge. Matthew doesn't even give her a name, he just says she's a Canaanite. That one word carries centuries of history. It tells Jesus and the disciples what they think they need to know about her before she ever opens her mouth. Sadly, we know something about that. People enter our public life wearing labels all the time.

"Homeless." "Addict." "Illegal." "Troublemaker." "Dangerous." "Despicable."

The thing about labels is, once we've assigned them, we give ourselves a free pass to stop listening because we think we already know the story. But Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman reminds us that the person in front of us is always more than the label we have put on them.

Our passage from Genesis gives us another story about that. Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery. They betrayed him. They essentially erased him from their family. Years later, those same brothers come to Egypt desperate for food, and Joseph is the person standing between them and starvation. Joseph has every reason to hold onto the past. He has every reason to say, "You made your choice. Now live with it." But instead, Joseph reveals himself to them. He weeps. He doesn't pretend that what happened didn't happen. He doesn't say, "No big deal!" Rather, he acknowledges that the harm was real. The betrayal was real. And he refuses to let the worst thing that his brothers ever did become the only thing that defines who they are. He makes room for a different future.

Perhaps that is part of what faith asks of us. Not to pretend that harm isn't harm. Not to ignore injustice. Not to avoid hard conversations. Not to require the people who have been hurt to forgive on command. But to refuse the idea that people are forever trapped inside the worst thing we have ever seen or heard from them. Because if today's Gospel tells us anything, it tells us that

even Jesus can encounter someone who changes the conversation. Even Jesus can discover that the boundaries he thought were righteous are too small. Even Jesus can change.

And if Jesus can change, perhaps so can we. That doesn't mean we have to agree with everyone. It doesn't mean that every fear is equally grounded in reality. It doesn't mean that being a good neighbor requires us to abandon our convictions. And it certainly doesn't mean that Christian love asks us to pretend that hurtful words aren't hurtful.

The Canaanite woman doesn't pretend Jesus' words are acceptable. She challenges them. She refuses to accept the boundary he has placed around her and her daughter. Joseph doesn't pretend that what his brothers did was acceptable, either. The harm was real. The betrayal was real.

But neither story allows us to believe that the harm is the end of the story. The Canaanite woman keeps advocating. Joseph makes room for a different future. And Jesus listens, learns, and changes.

That's a much harder kind of love than simply being nice to one another. It is the kind of love that can tell the truth about harm while still leaving room for transformation. You see, Christian faith asks something harder of us than simply being right. It asks us to remain human with one another. It asks us to listen for the person underneath the label. It asks us to notice what is coming out of our own mouths. And it asks us to remain open to the possibility that God might still have something to teach us, especially when we are certain that we have nothing left to learn.

That's particularly important for us today as we are worshipping in a public place, because perhaps some of the people around us agree with us. Perhaps some don't. Perhaps someone looking out a window right now is irritated that we're here. Perhaps someone walking through this park wonders what we're doing. Perhaps someone who is unhoused will see us gathered here. In all of these possibilities, what comes out of us matters.

Not because we need to perform Christianity for our neighbors. Not because we need to prove that Union Church is right and somebody else is wrong. But because this is the faith we say we believe. A faith in which the Spirit of God keeps working through us to build bigger and bigger tables. A faith in which the stranger can become a teacher. A faith in which the person we have reduced to a label gets a name, a story, a voice.

Perhaps it is actually fortuitous that we are outside today. We don't have our walls. We don't have that artificial boundary. We can't pretend that the messy world is somewhere else. We are right here in it, and maybe that is exactly where the Gospel belongs. Not safely contained inside our sanctuary, but out here, where neighbors disagree, where people are hurting, where fear and anger and compassion and generosity all exist at the same time, where we sometimes say things we wish we hadn't said, where other people sometimes say things that wound us, where people surprise us, where we have the possibility of changing our minds, where we have the possibility of changing someone else's mind, where we have the possibility of discovering that the person we thought was outside the circle was never outside God's love at all.

Today, instead of asking, "Who is the problem?" Jesus invites us to ask a different question: What is coming out of us? Is it contempt? Is it fear? Is it defensiveness? Is it the need to win?

Or is it something else? Is it curiosity? Is it courage? Is it compassion? Is it truth spoken with love? Is it the willingness to listen? Is it the humility to say, “I may have more to learn”?

Because that’s what I hear in these two stories. Joseph does not erase the past, but he makes room for a future. The Canaanite woman does not accept the boundary placed around her. She refuses to stop speaking. And, brilliantly, Jesus does not cling to the boundary he had been taught once he sees that it is too small. The Gospel doesn’t ask us to be perfect. It asks us to be open — open enough to listen, open enough to learn, open enough to let God’s love make our hearts larger than they were yesterday.

Friends, that’s the kind of neighbor we are called to be — not the neighbor who always wins the argument, not the neighbor who never gets angry, not the neighbor who has all the answers, but the neighbor who keeps showing up, who tells the truth, who refuses to dehumanize, who listens for the humanity underneath the label, who shares what we have, who protects those who need protection, who remains willing to learn, and who trusts that God’s love is always bigger than the boundaries we draw around it.

So today, without walls around us, may our worship spill out into this neighborhood. May what comes out of us be worthy of the God we claim to follow. And when we encounter someone whose story challenges us, may we have the courage of the Canaanite woman to speak and the humility of Jesus to change.

May it be so. Alleluia and Amen.

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Genesis 45:1-15, Matthew 15:(10-20), 21-28
August 16, 2026