

Pastor Roy's sermon from August 17, 2014

Last day of school, 4th grade. We had a field trip to Mount Vernon, George Washington's home, and we moved to a different county in Maryland. That summer our family got to know some new friends and missed old ones. But the old neighborhood had already changed for good since my best friend Kyle moved the same summer back to Albany, New York. He pretty much had the complete star wars card collection. Everything was always more fun with him around. Once, he broke his wrist jumping over a picnic table. He demonstrated how it happened for us several times, since we weren't there for the original action. There were the arrowheads which we would rediscover in his back yard. And riding bikes in a trailer court was always more fun because of the speed bumps and all the people and stories. We would make up elaborate, imaginative explanations and plans for why school would close on weekends, holidays, and during the summer—especially that last summer when both of us moved away.

So when we moved, all of that was gone. We were new. We were strangers. No old friends, except for special occasions and road trips. In the fall, my sister and I started new schools. That was tough. To this day I can see the sights and smell the smells of being *new* in an *old* school. We even switched churches for one which was closer. *Everything* was new, and that wasn't a good thing for me, at least not for a year or two. But when the emotional dust settled, I learned that there were always new friends and experiences around the corner, if I just stuck with a new thing.

How many times have you moved or started something new and felt a bit like an outsider? A new year of school. A new job. A new address. A new marriage. A new station in life. Or chronic condition. We become foreigners without even moving.

Isaiah reminds us that foreigners and sojourners need help, justice, a fair chance to make it in a new landscape—not to be enslaved literally or figuratively. The temple, the house of God—a sign of the faithful life—was to be a place of prayer, of joy and salvation, of rest, welcome, and freedom for all peoples. Isn't it true that as we welcome, we discover what it means to be home.

Of course, when we welcome we push ourselves to the limit and it can be uncomfortable. We prefer the well-worn paths of relationships, entertainment, and habits. Do we at times set aside good judgment for well-established habits? Even thought-habits about others as is shown in Jesus' conversation with the Canaanite woman.

Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman is awkward, to say the least. The disciples encourage him, "Make her go away." And Jesus' response to her is equally awkward, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." In other words, I can't help you. And she responds. "Yes, you can. I don't care about your confusing theology about God's chosen people. You can easily help me right now just by sharing your leftovers. OK?"

For the Canaanite woman, driven by love for her daughter, faith is not figuring out what everyone thinks about God and then believing the same thing. No, faith is a driving force of love that steps over everyone else's puny understanding of God, and justice, and mercy; and instead insists on the one true God who is always for compassionate love rather than what everyone else thinks. This woman had the nerve to question the son of God, the son of David and demand that he step up to the plate of justice filled mercy and heal her daughter.

There were many traditions and scriptures to support Jesus statement, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." She would have none of it. She presses on into the true mercy of God which needs no permission, no argument, only the passion of the Spirit of God who brings peace, joy, friendship, and unity. Tribal boundaries and race, major world religions, political parties, stereotypes, these all can be

short cuts to judgment. “Oh, I know how this person is. I don’t have to get to know them because they are all the same, and I needn’t trouble myself with their kind.”

What does Jesus say to the woman’s brilliant, humble response “Bring on the crumbs. The crumbs from the meal of your healing are all I need. Heal my daughter. This is God’s will.”

”Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” . . .and her daughter was healed instantly.

She was coloring outside the lines. She listened to the voice of the Spirit drawing her along the path of her daughter’s healing. When love boldly draws us to welcome the stranger, there are no mistakes, no need to fear offending God, of going too far. On the day of this rare trip outside the territory of Israel, it is likely that even Jesus learned a practical lesson about hospitality and justice. Every experience is an opportunity to hone our practice of justice and mercy. The encounter was every bit a living parable for the disciples who were baffled by Jesus’ declaration of great faith.

The stranger, the unknown neighbor, the poor are all welcome at the table of mercy. Here we learn the hospitality of God which is not defined by our boundaries. Here we learn the practice of justice and mercy without holding back. This justice of God which always takes the side of the stranger and the poor. And this same God who cares for the stranger will also care for us.

[pause] Thanks be to God. Amen.