

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8; Psalm 67; Rom 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matt 15:10-28 The Rev. Linda Spiers  
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost – Year A – August 20, 2017 Trinity Episcopal Church

“My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” (Is 56:7). The National Cathedral in Washington has these words from Isaiah inscribed in the heart of the cathedral. They are also words inscribed on the face of many houses of worship, many Pentecostal churches in particular. Church is meant to welcome and include all people, no matter what their difference.

Diana Eck tells the story of Gandhi in her book *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*. She writes: “In re-creating the *we*, Gandhi began at the household level or with the village of one thousand people; his vision was to extend the ethics, the care, and the common sense of the household to the whole of humankind. He began with the symbols of the domestic, the immediate, the near at hand. In religion, this means that the locus of religious life is not to be sought afar, by leaving home and society to journey to the far shore, the horizon, the frontier. The proper arena for religious life is not the Himalayas or the hermitage—not out there, but right here in the interrelatedness and struggles of the household and the village, on the ‘frontiers of encounter.’ This is where *we* must be reconstituted: in how one behaves as well as in what one believes.”<sup>1</sup>.

Jesus went into the cities of Tyre and Sidon where he has an encounter with

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<sup>1</sup> Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 206.

a Canaanite woman. In his day being a woman and a Canaanite were both against her; however, she needed help for her daughter. When a mom (or a father) needs help for a child, I believe she will go to any lengths to get that help. The woman takes the initiative and speaks to Jesus. She has courage to do something that would be taboo in her time. Help me. Help my daughter. The disciples tried to have Jesus send her away. There have been other encounters in the Gospels where the disciples have tried to protect Jesus from being bothered.

Jesus responds in an odd way: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” She was persistent and knelt down before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” Jesus answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” (Matthew 15:26). “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” She doesn’t give up until she gets the help for her daughter that Jesus ultimately heals. The woman challenges Jesus and he challenges her in return. I wonder why he didn’t see her faith in the beginning. Jesus doesn’t always respond as we expect, and that often challenges faith. Perhaps he wanted the disciples to see her faith—to see the courage and conviction she had in seeking help for her daughter. Despite the fact that she was a foreigner, Jesus was willing to have an encounter with her—a dialogue that showed her human need. It’s only in conversation with the other that we can come to know the other and ultimately see the similarities in each other.

Jesus revealed the words of Isaiah, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” I think he also revealed the actions attributed to Gandhi: “The proper arena for religious life is not the Himalayas or the hermitage—not out there, but right here in the interrelatedness and struggles of the household and the village, on the ‘frontiers of encounter.’ This is where *we* must be reconstituted: in how one behaves as well as in what one believes.”

The Canaanite woman crossed boundaries that were normally not accepted—boundaries of ethnicity, religion, gender, background, and disease with her demon possessed daughter. God’s mercy is wider and deeper than we can imagine or fully understand. Jesus revealed that and she poignantly reminds us of that. Carry her story in your heart as we live through these troubling times. Fill your hearts with God’s mercy as you remember the times when Jesus crosses boundaries to encounter the other. His behavior invites us to cross boundaries when we need to. Remember this unnamed Canaanite woman when we sing “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy like the wideness of the sea” at the 9:30 a.m. service. Jesus listens to her and they both give us courage to breakdown barriers in our own time. There is hope in a faith-filled encounter, and our world needs us to take the risk.