



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

760 East Broad Street • Columbus Ohio 43205 • (614) 221-6552 • fax (614) 221-5722 • www.bspsc.org

“Crossing Borders”

Matthew 15:21-28

November 18, 2018

Reverend Ann Palmerton
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, OH

We navigate many kinds of borders. Visible borders are the most noticeable. They maintain order and structure. Football fields have sidelines. Basketball courts have free throw lines and foul lines. They serve an important purpose. Borders keep life’s playing fields fair.

Borders can be subtle or even invisible. Years ago, when we moved from California to Ohio, one of the first borders I encountered was verbal. It was summer time. I soon realized I’d crossed a border when I heard a new word to refer to soft drinks. My west coast word, “soda,” no longer worked. We’d crossed an invisible border and entered a region where soft drinks are “pop.” Go into the south, and soft drinks become “Coke.” Later that same summer I really knew we’d crossed a border when we were up at Lake Erie and saw a sign, “Beer, Pop, Worms.”

Borders describe us. They can be barriers. They also can be guides. A new crosswalk on Broad Street guards those on foot. Borders can mark a dangerous edge as well as a new frontier. They can keep us in or move us forward. Consider the border that marks the transition from childhood to adulthood. Over time, that border became less and less clear and seemed to stretch longer and longer. As a result, sociologists invented a new category, a new border, called adolescence.

Nations have borders and border crossings to control who comes in and who goes out. On the front of our bulletin is an icon with a visible border, a barbed wire fence.¹ We see Jesus on the other side of the wire. I wonder what side of the fence he’s on. Have we imprisoned him? Or are we the ones imprisoned? The icon invites our reflection.²

Our Gospel reading is about borders. It is a troubling story, because the Jesus we meet is not the Jesus we think we know.

Jesus and his disciples head north, out of Galilee, into the country we call Lebanon. The Bible doesn’t describe how he and his friends feel as they cross the border. We don’t know if they feel afraid. What we do know is that once they cross the border they are in the minority. These Galileans are strangers, with different accents, from a different culture. I imagine the disciples are nervous, on edge. Maybe Jesus is, too.

Weary travelers long for rest and food. But before they can relax, a Canaanite woman steps outside her home. She shouts at them. She’s loud and makes demands. “Have *mercy* on me, Lord, Son of David.” She uses faith language, a language Jesus understands.

¹ <https://www.trinitystores.com/artwork/christ-maryknoll>

² <http://religiondocbox.com/79579497-Christianity/Crossing-boundaries-matthew-15-21-28-jim-zazzera-23-may-2010-faith-presbyterian-church.html>

But he doesn't answer. He remains silent.

That's no surprise. Animosity between Israelites and Canaanites goes way back. Long ago, they battled over possession of the Promised Land. Israel won, and the land changed hands at a terrible cost—a strained relationship full of mutual resentment.

The Canaanite woman doesn't invite Jesus into her home. She knows he won't set foot in *her* house. But she is desperate. She's got a daughter and her daughter is not well. We aren't told what is wrong, except that her daughter is in trouble, in need of what Jesus has to offer.

The mother keeps shouting, "Have mercy on *me*, Lord, Son of David." She can't be well until her daughter is, too. Jesus ignores her. He doesn't answer. The disciples plug their ears. "Send her away."

Finally, Jesus speaks, but not to her. He simply states his mission, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Wait, what? When a lost one doesn't have the right bloodline or DNA or faith, is Jesus saying he looks the other way? "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." This is how he understands his calling.

The woman stops shouting. She steps closer, into his space. She kneels at his feet and begs. "Lord, help me." It's an uncomfortable, vulnerable moment, with a staggering power imbalance. One kneeling woman, surrounded by a dozen men from a conquering country.

At last, Jesus speaks to her. This is his moment to shine, to cross a border, to welcome her into God's family. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Whoa! Is that Jesus speaking? That put-down doesn't sound like our Jesus.

There's no other way to say it. Jesus disappoints. He's so dismissive and closed. His words reveal his prejudice against her and her people. This crossing borders stuff really must be hard, because even Jesus has trouble. All of us face borders we're reluctant to cross. In our story, Jesus carries the same cultural baggage as everyone else. He struggles like we struggle. It is remarkable that this story is included in Matthew's Gospel.

"It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Through the years, scholars have scrambled to try to make Jesus' words sound kinder. Some suggest that Jesus calls her a "puppy" instead of a "dog," even though the Greek language doesn't support that translation.³

I don't think Jesus is calling her a cute little puppy. In his time, dogs were stray and semi-wild, not members of our families as they are today. Back then, dogs were in the same category as rats. Jesus says she has no right to demand the help of Israel's Messiah. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the *rats*."

Even now, his harsh words sting. But she's formidable. She persists. "Okay. Your people come first. Fine. You want to call me a dog? Fine. Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

All she asks for is a crumb. A crumb will satisfy her. Her bold, witty comeback raises the bar of his behavior. She reminds him that he is better than this. She will not let his worst self win.

³ R.T. France, *Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987

To his credit, Jesus sees God in the dignity of his enemy. He looks through the borders of his particular upbringing and culture and sees a person, not an object. He alters his outlook. He crosses a border.

“Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” He offers her grace. Her daughter receives healing. That’s the last we hear of them. But we remember her, because no other New Testament story shows Jesus in quite this light as “he learns a clearer and wider understanding of the will of God.”⁴ He resists, wrestles, changes.

Our Lord was a life-long learner and so are we. We resist new ideas and new people. Jesus’ closed attitude toward the stranger reminds us how hard border crossing really is. In an earlier discussion in our *Crossing Borders* series, someone said, and I paraphrase, “We at Broad Street go to great lengths to cross borders around the world to be with Peruvian people. But too often, in our own city, we are afraid to cross certain streets into certain neighborhoods.”⁵

Two weeks ago, Ellen Sherby was our first speaker in the *Crossing Borders* series. She works for Presbyterian World Mission. She challenged us to bring our humanity and use our intelligence to embrace a vision of mission—to imagine a single table around which all people can sit. There is no one underneath the table, waiting for crumbs. At God’s table, there is enough room for everyone.⁶

The Canaanite woman helps Jesus cross a border. Her persistence prods him. He makes a choice to cross a border. He doesn’t go there easily. We all face borders we are reluctant to cross. The Thanksgiving holiday is this week. We may encounter a laboratory for such border crossings in our own families, among our own friends.

Consider again the icon on our bulletin cover. Who is on the other side? In our story, a border becomes an invitation to relationship with someone even Jesus starts out thinking of as “other.”

Jesus will lead us across borders. He will lead us to the other side of the fence. Will we see him in the Canaanite woman, in the Ethiopian eunuch, in families in detention centers and refugee camps? Will we recognize him in our own city? Jesus stands at the edge of all borders. We cannot always be sure what side he’s on. Maybe, at times, he is on both sides. Maybe he is working to eliminate the border itself. We follow a living God, who crosses borders, who breaks down dividing walls. Our work is to trust that God welcomes all and to show that welcome to others. Amen.

⁴ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28*, p. 97

⁵ Bayardo Gonzalez, *Crossing Borders* series, class on 11-4-18.

⁶ Ellen Sherby, *Crossing Borders* series, class on 11-4-18