

"Out of Bounds"

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8; Psalm 67;
Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:21-28

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

"You're out of bounds! You're out of bounds!" Do you remember that happening to you when you were playing some sort of game at school, where there was a boundary limit set and you had accidentally crossed it? "You're out of bounds!" Do you remember that happening? It seemed to happen to me all the time when I was playing games at school.

Jesus and his disciples are dealing with boundaries too, in today's Gospel. Particularly if you'll read the whole chapter, you'll see that the beginning of the chapter deals with the whole issue of who is "in" and who is "out"; who belongs and who doesn't belong; who is clean and who is unclean; who is pure and who is impure; who is righteous and who is not.

The ELCA Assembly this week in Florida has been dealing with this whole issue of boundaries – how are we to minister to and accept gay people and lesbians, especially those who are in some sort of committed relationship with one another, and how does all of that fit within who can be a pastor and who cannot, and what are the boundaries of office in the church?

Hardly a game went by at school when I was a kid playing during recess, when there wasn't a dispute of some sort over boundaries. It usually went along the lines of somebody had got out of bounds, but the argument would always be, "Well, was that exactly where the boundary line was?" or if that wasn't the case, "Well, it was just an accident – they didn't mean to do it, so maybe they could still be in the game", or "did you see their foot really cross over the whole line?" I used to be in these arguments in a big way; often was me that was transgressing. It was interesting to me to reflect on this and to remember what my elementary school principal put in my last report card – that I would make an interesting and ideal defense lawyer!

Of course as our disputes and arguments went on, tempers became frayed and often they ended up in calling one another names and breaking out into actual fist fights, and by the end of recess the whole game had been spoiled and God spare the poor teacher, because we went back into the classroom hot, sweaty, frustrated, whining and grizzly . . . until the next recess.

Just so, Jesus finds himself confronted at the beginning of the chapter by the Pharisees who were disturbed about the way the disciples had not kept up with ritual and tradition, and

therefore had not obeyed the will of God. They were sitting down to meals without washing their hands (this was part of the Jewish cleanliness code and law) and it had everything to do with purities and impurities, and who might come before God and who might not, and to willfully reject such ritual tradition was to reject the will of God, in the eyes of faithful people.

And as if that weren't enough, then Jesus is confronted by this yelling Canaanite woman who pushes her way into His presence and starts demanding that He do something for her. She calls on His power and grace, and she demands forgiveness and compassion for her daughter. For that's what Christ's healing amounted to, and that's how the healing of people who were ill was understood.

But most disturbingly in this complex, difficult little piece of Gospel, Jesus initially turns a deaf ear to her. The disciples recognize she's breaking boundaries; they understand all the boundaries that are being broken. First of all (and I have to apologize to you ladies; this is not my fault, I'm just reporting the history), women didn't count in those days and they had no business approaching a Jewish man (particularly someone who wasn't related to them) and worst of all, what was a Canaanite woman doing pushing her way into his presence? On top of that she was a gentile, she wasn't a Jew, and a pagan probably since, if she came from Canaan she worshiped Baal. The disciples knew this one was right out; there was no place for her at the table, whatsoever. And so they called upon authority, the authority of Jesus. "Jesus", they said, "get rid of her. Send her home. Cast her out. Be done with her. Get rid of her."

But she has recognized something. She has also recognized Jesus' authority and makes the astounding announcement as she comes before Him to plead her case, "Lord, Son of David" she calls him. For some people of that time, that was the equivalent of calling Jesus the Messiah. She sees in Jesus what the Israelites and the disciples themselves cannot see. This One is the beloved Son of God. This One comes to the world with grace and favor. This One brings into being God's unconditional love.

But more disturbingly still, Jesus turns to her and says there is no grace for her. The grace He has brought is for the children of Israel and she is no more than a dog, a cur, cowering in the dust, cringing and whining and licking at his feet and begging his favor. Even more astoundingly, the woman accepts the role.

These last few years have been disturbing and difficult for us as Lutherans as we've struggled, and continue to struggle, with the whole issue of human sexuality. And where does our sexuality fit? And what could possibly keep us from the love of God as we express that sexuality? How might it be expressed? And how should it properly be understood and stewarded? We've been dealing with this issue. Some would call it just a political struggle; others would see in it a deep theological issue that has left us all struggling and divided, because it's not clear to us exactly how such boundaries are to be drawn.

And like the Canaanite woman and the disciples, we call upon authority, the authority of the Churchwide Assembly. Unfortunately our American minds so easily muddle the Churchwide

Assembly and its operation, with congressional operations. We do not send delegates to the Churchwide Assembly. Our Synod sent a number of people to the Assembly, but they were not instructed to vote or act in any one particular way. Rather they were sent, each of them, as voting members, called to pray and think and reflect carefully upon all the issues before the Assembly prior to their going there. And then to speak in confidence how they felt they should act in the light of their prayer and their faith. And they voted accordingly. They called on the Holy Spirit to be present to them in the Assembly that that Assembly might speak for the whole Church. And so, on Friday that Assembly spoke to these issues.

The first thing the Assembly did was recognize how deeply divided we are and how impossible it is for us, at this moment, to discern clearly how we should act and what we should do. And so the national church is asking us to respect one another, no matter what position we take. We are not asked to force other people to see things our way. We are not asked to walk out of the church because it's got things wrong. But rather, we are asked to live with one another in grace, in peace, and in harmony and, respecting each other's position on the issues.

The second thing the Assembly has asked us to do is to minister to everyone in the congregation in the same faithful and caring way; to single people, to married people, to gay people, to lesbian people, to bisexual people, to transsexual people, to people of all sorts of sexuality in all sorts of committed relationships, to support them, to understand them, and to be with them as we are with everybody who belongs to our congregations.

And finally, the Church in Assembly, called for respect to the boundaries that we already have established, that those people serving in ministry who are not in a heterosexual, marital relationship, must remain celebrate in order to continue in office. There are other requirements, too, that one must pass in order to be a pastor. One needs a background university education and degree; one needs to pass through the courses in the seminary; one needs to be examined by professors in the seminary to see if one is fit for ordination. Then one is examined by the Synod and its examiners to see if they find a person fit for ministry. And finally, finally the candidate is brought to a congregation who will discern whether or not that person should be called into ministry and then, and only then, is that person ordained.

This Assembly has operated in terms of faith and from the heart. Which is exactly what Jesus sees in the Canaanite woman. He is not impressed by her exterior. He's not impressed by her background. He is impressed by her faithfulness, her heartfelt call to His presence. It's the same heartfelt call that is uttered every time you come forward to receive Christ's body and blood and along with it, His forgiveness and His promise of salvation. For this altar must always be open as Christ's heart is open – to the clean and the unclean, to the righteous and the unrighteous, to the pure and to the impure.

You see, Jesus doesn't so much break boundaries as He makes it clear where boundaries belong. People can't play in the game of life without boundaries. We can't live as a Christian community without boundaries. And so Jesus does not ask the Canaanite woman to change in any way. Presumably she returns to her home somewhere in the Land of Canaan. And

presumably she continues her everyday life, having been met with the unconditional love, compassion and forgiveness of God.

And do you notice Jesus doesn't berate the disciples, either? He leaves them with the traditional boundaries with they live and out of which our boundaries have grown. What Jesus does make clear is that we are not in a position to draw boundaries about who may and who may not come into God's presence and seek His love, His compassion and His forgiveness.

In the schoolyard when things got really heated, we appealed to authority too. The authority we appealed to was the teacher on playground duty that day. And the teachers were always quick to deal with boundary issues. Why? Well they realized it wasn't boundaries that were important, but that the kids should get on and play the game so that it could be concluded before recess was over.

Amen.