

Crossing Boundaries to Build Faith (Matthew 15:10–28)

Premkumar Immanuel Clement

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Some boundaries are visible, and some are invisible. Lines on a map mark National boundaries. Geographical boundaries show where one country ends and another begins. Cultural boundaries are marked by language, customs, food, traditions, and ways of life.

But invisible boundaries distinguish between “us” and “them,” between those who belong and those who do not, and between the insider and the outsider. These are the most painful boundaries that are written in the human heart.

That is why I have chosen the theme for today: **“Crossing Boundaries to Build Faith.”**

The Gospel reading begins with Jesus challenging one of the religious boundaries of his time. The Pharisees are concerned about ritual purity—what makes a person clean or unclean.

But Jesus takes the conversation deeper: “It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” Jesus moves the question from external boundaries to the condition of the heart.

What makes us unclean is not another person’s nationality, culture, language, or identity. What defiles us is what comes from within: hatred, evil intentions, arrogance, violence, false witness, and all those attitudes that diminish the dignity of another human being.

And then Matthew immediately takes us across another boundary. Jesus goes into the region of Tyre and Sidon. And there a Canaanite woman approaches him. She is an outsider, a woman, and a Gentile who stands outside the religious and cultural identity of Israel. Yet she

knows something about Jesus. And she comes crying: “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David.” She does not ask for privilege or recognition. She asks for **mercy**. It is one of the oldest prayers of the human soul.

This prayer has been whispered in monasteries, prayed beside hospital beds, spoken at funerals, cried out in moments of desperation, and prayed by people who have nowhere else to turn. And remarkably, to this prayer, Jesus is silent. The woman is not discouraged. She continues to cry out. The disciples become uncomfortable and say, “Send her away.” But she does not go away. She kneels before Jesus. “Lord, help me.” She was persistent because she knew that **Mercy is at the heart of Jesus’ ministry. But the question is: if mercy is at the heart of God, did Jesus extend mercy to people of all faiths, cutting across national and cultural boundaries?** In today’s scripture reading, we see how faith leads to mercy, and religious faith cannot be reduced to maintaining boundaries.

And yet, in today’s Gospel, there is an obstacle. Jesus says:

“It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” These are difficult words.

Jesus is speaking from within the historical understanding of Israel as God’s chosen people.

The “children” represent Israel; the “dogs” represent those outside that covenant community.

The woman, however, does something remarkable. She does not argue against God’s particular relationship with Israel. She does not say, “Israel should not be chosen.”

Instead, she sees something deeper. She says: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

She discovers that **God’s mercy extends beyond the boundaries of chosenness.** If God is truly merciful, then God’s mercy cannot finally be confined. If God is truly gracious, grace

cannot remain locked inside one human category. If God is truly God, then no human boundary can determine the ultimate reach of God's compassion.

With her plea, Jesus recognizes her faith: "Woman, great is your faith!"

As an immigrant, I read this story from a particular place. Many times I feel that I am standing at a boundary. When someone crosses a national or geographical boundary, something happens to one's sense of identity. You discover that identity is more complicated than geography. You may continue to love the place you came from while learning to live in a new place. You may carry your language, memories, customs, faith, and traditions with you while learning the practices of another culture. You discover that you can belong to a history without being limited by it. You can honor where you came from while learning to receive what is new. And perhaps this is one reason the Canaanite woman's story speaks so powerfully to me. She stands at a boundary. But she does not allow the boundary to determine the limits of her faith. She crosses an **ideological boundary** because she believes God's mercy is greater than the categories people use to understand one another. She crosses a **geographical boundary** because she comes from Tyre and Sidon into the world of Jesus and Israel. She crosses a **religious boundary** because she approaches the Jewish Messiah as a Gentile. And she crosses an **emotional boundary** because even silence does not make her abandon hope. Her identity does not disappear when she crosses the boundary. Instead, her faith becomes visible. The Gospel does not ask us to erase our differences. Jesus does not say that the woman must first become someone else before she can receive mercy. Her identity remains. But God's mercy reaches across the boundary.

And that is the kind of community of faith the Gospel invites us to become.

We must remember that the church itself is a community of people who have crossed boundaries. The Gospel came to us because someone crossed a boundary. Jesus crossed the

boundary between the powerful and the powerless. He touched those whom others considered untouchable. He ate with those whom others excluded. He welcomed those whom others pushed aside.

So how can the church claim to follow Christ while building walls that Christ came to tear down? Perhaps the church has a special responsibility toward the “outsiders” because the church itself is called to be a place of belonging. A Church is the place where people do not have to prove that they belong. It is a place where the stranger can become a neighbor, the outsider can become a friend, and the rejected can discover dignity. Jesus crossed boundaries to reveal the wideness of God’s mercy. And now the invitation comes to us. Let us cross the boundaries of fear, prejudice, nationalism, racism, religious exclusion, and cultural suspicion. Let the church proclaim:

“You are a beloved child of God. There is a place for you at this table.”

For when we cross boundaries in love, we do not weaken the church. Rather, **we build faith.**

And when we build faith by welcoming those whom the world has pushed aside, we discover that the boundary we thought separated *them* from *us* was never a boundary in God’s heart.

Amen.