

Sermon
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Amy Foster
August 16, 2020
(Zoom)

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

Psalm 67

Matthew 15:21-28

If you were able to watch our worship service last week, I'm sure you remember the wonderful message about courage that Frances Chamberlain shared with us in her reflections on the dramatic gospel lesson about Jesus walking on water and Peter stepping out of the boat to join him. Even when Peter faltered, Jesus was there for him. This scene inspires us, in Frances' [or maybe Peloton's] words, to "be comfortable being uncomfortable" - to have courage to step out of that boat and move forward in the face of challenges. We know our world and we as individuals face many challenges right now--challenges from COVID, the challenges of fighting racism, and the many personal challenges we each face. We need courage to face them, and the gospel reassures us that our faith in Jesus will hold us up when we do.

The courage to act in faith, to risk discomfort and do the right thing, is crucial. This week we will reflect on another kind of courage—the courage to challenge our typical ways of thinking—to examine the assumptions we make about ourselves, about each other, and about God. This courageous examination can help us identify and remove our blinders, to look at things a new way, and, most importantly, to broaden and expand our understanding of God's love.

This push to recognize the expansiveness of God's love is found throughout scripture and is a clear theme in what we have heard in our worship service today.

The passage from Isaiah that we heard was written during the time of exile in ancient Israel - a time of tremendous difficulty and upheaval. The Israelites had been scattered, separated from their homeland and from each other, and they longed to return to what they had known. In such a circumstance, alienated from what is familiar and engulfed in uncertainty (does that sound familiar?), it would

be tempting to circle the wagons and just focus on protecting oneself and one's own group. But in today's reading, after Isaiah offers a statement of encouragement and hope, the prophet reminds us that God's love does not recognize our artificial boundaries. God is not "our" God, whoever "we" are, but the God of all. Isaiah insists that everyone who walks in the way of love is embraced by God, even those "foreigners" that the Israelites probably feared. God's love is bigger than we think—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is not just the God of the Israelites, but the God of all, and the love of God extends to all. Isaiah's listeners, and we, are being urged to expand our own love and acceptance more broadly than we already are. As Isaiah says, "my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."

And then there's that gospel lesson that we heard. It's a tough one! When our online Bible study on Matthew's gospel met this spring, all of us really wrestled with this unsettling story about Jesus and his interaction with the Canaanite woman. It's hard to process this story because it doesn't reflect the kind of Jesus we think we know and love. This is not the Jesus who walks on water; this Jesus calls the Canaanite woman and her daughter "dogs." Ouch. But no matter how difficult this story is, it has a lot to tell us, not just about Jesus, but about ourselves. When the woman Jesus has rejected stands up for herself, he is forced to see her, and to see his entire mission, in a new way. His assumptions about the reach of his message, and therefore the reach of God's love, need to be challenged. Jesus turns to a new, broader vision that expands the scope of his mission to include everyone, and it is the faith of a Canaanite woman – a "foreigner" in Isaiah's words - that accomplishes this.

I imagine that Jesus entered this encounter with the unnamed woman with a pretty good sense of himself and his mission, so I expect he was probably a little rattled by the turn of events. But he had the courage to listen and to accept the truth she revealed, and he was willing to change – this couldn't have been easy, and serves as a model for all of us.

It's not easy for any of us to be confronted with the need to change our perspective, especially when we think we already have a pretty good handle on things. I experienced this recently when I read Ibram X. Kendi's book, *How to Be An Antiracist*. I had read and heard a lot about it and was really looking forward to reading it. I certainly expected it to challenge me—to push me to determine how I

can take steps to be antiracist, but, honestly, I thought it would mostly reinforce ideas I had already been exposed to, confirm what I thought I already knew. Boy was I wrong! This book, which I highly recommend, exposed me to perspectives I had not considered before. It made me re-examine arguments and assumptions that need questioning. It helped expand and deepen my understanding of race and racism, including recognizing that I still have a long way to go. Kendi's experience growing up in this country is probably as different from mine as the Canaanite woman's was from Jesus' – perhaps it is exposure to this kind of difference that helps us grow.

In challenging times, such as those we are experiencing right now, we may be tempted to narrow our focus, to close in on ourselves, the way those exiled ancient Israelites may have wanted to do, but scripture—from Isaiah to Matthew and more - urges us not to do this, because God doesn't do this. The way of God, the way of love is inclusive, not exclusive – as the hymn we heard today tells us, “there is a WIDENESS in God's mercy” and “The love of God is broader than the measure of the mind.” When we think we already know the way of love, the way of God, we need to have the courage to listen, to let the foreigner, the Canaanite, the “other” expand our view – as we, with God's help, determine how to move forward, both individually and as a community toward a more just and loving world. And, as we were reminded last week, Jesus is with us on this path, on this ongoing effort to walk, with courage, on the way of love.