

**Sermon**  
**August 20, 2023**  
**“Beyond Boundaries”**

*Based on Genesis 45:1-15, Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28.*

Earlier this week I was driving into town. I have a twenty-five minute drive so it is often a time of reflection and often on my work at the church. This week I was thinking about the commitment I had made to lead worship and to take on hospice and funeral care should it be needed. It is hard to say no to a funeral in the context of church life. Last week I was asked to do a committal for a Viet Nam vet who was raised in Guilford. This week came a call was for a woman who died at 71 of heart failure. She and her wife had been married for for 26 years. As I came to know the family I realized the woman herself, her brother, niece and grand-niece were all little people, the first I have ever met. And tomorrow I will lead a memorial service for the homeless man who was murdered on Harris Hill by another homeless man.

It had seemed so simple when I agreed to lead worship and take on funerals and yet the reality has already taken me well beyond the boundaries of this church.

It hit me that this is exactly what Jesus was trying to demonstrate when he cast the demons from the daughter of the woman. My own mind had been like that of the Pharisees, trying to draw boundaries around my work and the work of the church.

All the while God had a whole adventure planned, laying before me the truth of the church and God’s love --taking me into the lives of people I would never otherwise come to know and drawing people who would not otherwise come to church or into this building.

There is a term introduced in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by Meister Eckhardt which is “Gelassenheit”. A translation of the idea from German might be “You must know that to be empty of all created things is to be full of God, and to be full of created things is to be empty of

God.” I thought of it this week as I had to empty myself of expectations and I was filled with awe as I was privileged to witness a loving family bid farewell to their beloved.

In the scripture we hear Jesus say to the disciples:

*“Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted.”*

And Peter says “explain this to us”.

First Jesus goes on to graphically explain how our thoughts can get tangled up with expectations and prejudice and plans and that we need to let them go and be filled with the truth of love.

And then he demonstrates this with his terrible treatment of the Canaanite woman and her response calling out in deep faith. “She does not deny the distinctive place and priority of the “lost sheep of Israel,” but she claims a place at the table of God’s blessing as well. Her “great faith” today stands in stark contrast to the “little faith” demonstrated by Peter (last week)... She is in fact an exemplar of faith for the disciples—though she is a woman, a Gentile, and even a despised Canaanite”.<sup>2</sup>

Theologians explain his treatment in a variety of ways.

Some say Jesus himself was opened to new wisdom in that moment demonstrating that God constantly increases in love. More commonly we assume he is dramatically holding a mirror up to people’s prejudices---by treating this woman who needed him with the extreme prejudice-- only to be met by her faith and her daughters healing. She held true to the Gelassenheit of God, the outpouring of God’s love... and her daughter was healed.

The story of Joseph is a similar one.

I assume many of you know the background of the story. Joseph was beaten and sold as a slave by his brothers only to be purchased

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<sup>1</sup> Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense (Classics of Western Spirituality) Paperback – January 1, 1981, p. 288)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/sermon-seeds-for-the-heart/>

by the Pharaoh's guard and ultimately to be thrown in prison. He has dreams which ultimately help the Pharaoh through a terrible famine. The brothers who sold him then appear to beg for food and our scripture today tells the story of their encounter. We could say they don't deserve his pity but it is there nonetheless and again there is a "Gelassenheit" a pouring forth of love and forgiveness despite the past. He says to them lovingly...

*"You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have.*

*45:11 I will provide for you there and he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.*

So this brings us again beyond appearances and expectations...the brothers are released from their fears and guilt and Joseph is united with his family.

These three weeks we have seen God's abundance pour forth as loaves and fishes for all and everyone. Last week Peter's falling down and getting up allowed us to see God's abundant love there for each of us no matter our faith and today we see God reaching beyond boundaries of race and class.

It is a lot to take in...our own capacity for releasing all which holds us back from love and to know that God's is with us no matter what.

I want to finish by sharing a poem given this week in Sermon Seeds as a way to understand the Canaanite woman and how someone living the life of a slave could hold onto faith and God's infinite love.

O black and unknown bards of long ago,  
How came your lips to touch the sacred fire?  
How, in your darkness, did you come to know  
The power and beauty of the minstrel's lyre?  
Who first from midst his bonds lifted his eyes?  
Who first from out the still watch, lone and long,  
Feeling the ancient faith of prophets rise  
Within his dark-kept soul, burst into song?  
Heart of what slave poured out such melody  
As "Steal away to Jesus"? On its strains  
His spirit must have nightly floated free,

Though still about his hands he felt his chains.  
Who heard great “Jordan roll”? Whose starward eye  
Saw chariot “swing low”? And who was he  
That breathed that comforting, melodic sigh,  
“Nobody knows de trouble I see”?...  
There is a wide, wide wonder in it all,  
That from degraded rest and servile toil  
The fiery spirit of the seer should call  
These simple children of the sun and soil.  
O black slave singers, gone, forgot, unfamed,  
You—you alone, of all the long, long line  
Of those who’ve sung untaught, unknown, unnamed,  
Have stretched out upward, seeking the divine.  
You sang not deeds of heroes or of kings;  
No chant of bloody war, no exulting pean  
Of arms-won triumphs; but your humble strings  
You touched in chord with music empyrean.  
You sang far better than you knew; the songs  
That for your listeners’ hungry hearts sufficed  
Still live,—but more than this to you belongs:  
You sang a race from wood and stone to Christ.  
—James Weldon Johnson, *O Black and Unknown Bards*

**ALL SING One verse of Swing Low, Sweet Chariot”**

Let us pray...Thank You God for those who have gone before us as  
brave as the Canaanite woman, calling to God for the sake of our  
daughter and sons

Thank you for those who have gone before us using their powers to  
lift up their brothers and sister in Love

Thank You for your love which pours abundantly into our lives,  
helping, healing and holding us. Amen