

HOMILY: **20th Sunday of the Year [A]**

Isaiah 56: 1, 6-7 / Romans 11: 13-15, 29-32 / Matthew 15: 21-28

From the moment we manage to get our little bodies to stand up, we are confronted by **boundaries**.

When we're toddlers, Mom and Dad set up safety gates to keep us within a well-defined, safe space; they "child-proof" cabinet doors and closets and electric outlets so we won't hurt ourselves. Often Mom and Dad's own hands and arms and legs become our boundaries – they lay their very bodies down to keep us from wandering off into the street or into unsafe waters.

Growing up is about learning to recognize and deal with boundaries: how to safely negotiate our way through potentially dangerous places and situations.

As we get older, we begin to recognize social boundaries. We learn that there are boundaries that govern different relationships – and if those relationships are going to function as they should, those boundaries must be observed: the boundaries between doctor and patient, between employer and employee, between teacher and student, between elected official and constituent, between customer and client, between clergy and parishioner. And, as we know painfully well, crossing those boundaries can be disastrous.

Those boundaries, we would all agree, are good things . . .

But then there are boundaries that **we** create: boundaries we hide behind, boundaries we create out of fear, boundaries we set up to protect us from people of different races and cultures and religions and nationalities who we prefer to have little or nothing to do with. We also set up boundaries to preserve our own social status, our own wealth, our own ego and self-importance – and we will guard those boundaries at all costs. And, before long, we manage to convince ourselves that these boundaries were set up, not by us, but by God!

Quite often we set up boundaries to compartmentalize our lives – keeping the various pieces of our lives separate, so we don't have to deal with the unpleasant and confounding that complicate up our neatly ordered lives. Black and white is much easier to deal with than gray.

Some boundaries enable us to function as a society and a community – good! But other boundaries, in fact, preserve dysfunction. And, before long, even God becomes out-of-bounds in our lives.

Today's Gospel is about crossing those boundaries.

First, Mathew tells us that Jesus travels through the region of Tyre and Sidon. These two towns were Gentile territory that the Jew considered "unclean." So, by just

walking into these two villages, Jesus makes clear that the love of God embraces everyone. A boundary comes crashing down . . .

The second boundary is crossed by the Canaanite woman. She dares to approach Jesus – something that just wasn't done! – and she speaks up for both her daughter and her own self-worth as a woman of God. Her boldness is an act of faith in the mercy of God – mercy that she recognizes in the presence of this Jesus. Her trust in God's mercy results in the collapse of the boundaries that unjustly and cruelly isolates her from the rest of society.

Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman challenges the boundaries we have set up that separate us from one another.

God did not create the boundary between the United States and Canada or decide that the Ural Mountains will divide Europe and Asia; God did not deem that the United States will have one standard of living and Eritrea and Haiti a much lower one; God did not designate that one ethnicity or nationality or religion or gender will be the good guys – and everyone else will be the bad guys. The courage of the Canaanite woman should inspire us to look long and hard at our maps of the world and the boundaries we have set up and go to great lengths to preserve. To follow Jesus is to intentionally erase those boundaries that are obstacles to realizing God's kingdom of justice and peace in this time and place of ours.

Many years ago, in a village in Thailand, a Buddhist woman named Malai became a Christian, at the request of her baptized husband. The village's strict and overly scrupulous priest told Malai that she must never again go inside a Buddhist temple because, if she were seen entering a Buddhist shrine or temple, people would think that she was not sincere in her Christian faith.

Malai's elderly mother continued to practice Buddhism. Malai would continue to take her mother to the temple gate, but, obedient to the injunction of her pastor, Malai would no longer go inside the temple herself. She would have to ask a stranger to take her mother inside the temple and help her light the incense sticks and the other temple rituals. In Thai society, to take care of one's elders is a sacred responsibility, so it broke Malai's heart that she could no longer help her mother herself.

One day, as was their custom, Malai brought her mother to the temple and, again, asked a stranger to take her mother inside. While waiting outside for her mother, Malai began to cry. A Buddhist nun who was sweeping the forecourt of the temple saw her. She stopped her sweeping and gently asked what was wrong. Malai explained that as a Christian she could not go inside the temple and had to ask someone to do what Malai wanted to do for her beloved mother.

The nun stared for some time at the ground and then said to Malai: "Those who recognize the Holy and are moved to worship it are never among strangers, no matter what their religion happens to be. And those who are moved by the Holy to be compassionate are already one family."

Do not let your heart be so troubled, dear daughter . . . Mercy has given you the opportunity to allow someone else to perform an act of compassion towards your mother. Is that not a beautiful thing?" [*]

The mercy and compassion of God erases the labels and stereotypes, and collapses the boundaries and definitions that we use to separate different classes and religions. The search for meaning and purpose in our lives – what the Buddhist nun calls “the Holy” – transforms “strangers” into a “family” dedicated to the good of all. Jesus calls us to embrace “the Holy” by moving beyond our isolating boundaries and walls to realize that every one of us is a child of God, brothers and sisters all.

So, this week, cross a boundary that prevents you from doing something good. Tear down a wall – or at least take out a brick or two – that has separated you from someone else for too long. And, in doing so, rediscover the “Holy” among your family and friends.

“Is that not a beautiful thing?”

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[*] From a story by John Beeching, M.M., in **Maryknoll**, November-December 2016.]

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