

I speak to you in the name of our Creator, the Risen Christ and the Holy Spirit, the one who heals, restores, and transforms us. Amen.

The readings from Romans and Matthew today are bookends in a critical conversation about who's in and who's out. The writer of Matthew's Gospel is setting the groundwork for the expansion of God's kingdom to include the Gentiles, while Paul's letter to the Romans is reminding the Gentiles that "God has not rejected his people,... for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." Although Matthew is writing for a Jewish community and Paul is writing to Gentiles, they both make clear that Jesus was sent first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. It's a good reminder that we, the Gentile church should not get full of ourselves. It's all grace, not earned or reserved for the select elect.

There is actually quite a lot going on in those few verses from Romans, and it is worth slowing down for a moment because Paul is addressing a very real danger in the early Christian community. The church in Rome was made up of both Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus, and there were tensions between them. Some Gentile Christians had begun to assume that because they had now received the gospel, somehow God had finished with Israel. Paul will have none of it.

He begins with a very direct question: "Has God rejected his people?" And his answer is emphatic: "By no means!" Paul himself is an Israelite. He comes from the people of Israel, from the tribe of Benjamin. God has not suddenly changed God's mind about Israel.

And then Paul makes this remarkable statement: "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." God's faithfulness is not dependent upon our faithfulness. God does not give a gift and then take it back because we have failed to use it

properly. God does not issue a calling and then revoke it when we stumble. God's grace is not a temporary contract that can be cancelled when we get it wrong.

Paul is wrestling with a difficult question: If Israel is God's chosen people, and if so many Israelites have not accepted Jesus as Messiah, has God abandoned them? Paul emphatically says no. And he goes even further. Just before our reading today, Paul uses the image of an olive tree. The Gentiles are like branches from a wild olive tree that have been grafted into the cultivated olive tree of Israel. In other words, the Gentiles have not planted their own tree. They have not replaced Israel. They have been grafted into a story that began long before them.

That is where Paul's warning to the Gentile Christians becomes so important. They have no grounds for boasting. They are recipients of grace, not owners of it. They have been welcomed into something they did not create and could never have earned. And Paul refuses to turn the people of Israel into the theological Other. The very people from whom Jesus came, the people who received the covenants and the promises, who remain beloved. "For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable."

Then Paul gives us one of the great mysteries of this passage. He says that God has "imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all." Now that first part of the sentence is a doozy! God imprisons people in disobedience? I bet this line was very important to Calvin and his doctrine of predestination! But I don't think that's what Paul means here. As is often the case, the detail of the Greek can provide some clarity. συνέκλεισεν (synekleisen), from synkleio, literally something like "shut up together," "confine," or "enclose." The image is of being confined within a condition from which one cannot escape by one's own efforts.

God has brought the whole human family to the place where mercy, rather than merit, is the only ground on which anyone can stand. Our own efforts will not break us free from this enclosure of our failures and shortcomings.

Notice where Paul ends up. Not with a division between the deserving and the undeserving. Not with some people inside and others outside. Not with one group triumphing over another. He ends with mercy. Paul is not saying that everyone has behaved well. Quite the opposite. Paul has spent the past few chapters describing human disobedience and failure. But his astonishing conclusion is that human disobedience does not get the final word. God's mercy does. Paul is not saying that God makes us disobedient so that God can rescue us. Rather, he is saying that God has allowed both Jew and Gentile to discover that neither can claim God's mercy as an achievement or possession. Both are dependent upon grace. Both stand in need of mercy. And therefore, neither has grounds for boasting over the other.

And that helps us hear the Gospel reading in a slightly different way. Because the question in both readings is not simply, "Who belongs?" The deeper question is, "What happens when the boundaries we have drawn are confronted by the wideness of God's mercy?"

Now I confess that every time I read or hear this passage, I cringe when we get to the part where Jesus tells the Canaanite women that "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." It doesn't sound very Jesus like does it? I have read many different solutions to this difficult saying.

One suggestion is that Jesus was actually testing his disciples and using this to teach them. But I can't see Jesus rebuffing someone in order to make a cryptic point.

Another is that Jesus is testing the humility and faith of the woman. That one makes more sense, but I don't recall Jesus testing for humility elsewhere.

Someone even suggested that what Jesus was really saying is that his disciples regard Gentiles as dogs. But if so, he chose a hurtful and insulting way to say it.

One popular solution is that the Greek word here is puppy. It is a diminutive of dog, it conveys affection. It is not meant as a slur. Ulrich Luz says that the use of the term dog is not referring to despised wild dogs, but a household pet. This makes sense of the contrast between dogs and children. The children are fed first and then their pets. But that still seems demeaning to me.

Another suggests that this is early on in Jesus' ministry and his own understanding of his ministry had not yet evolved to include the Gentiles. This one only makes sense if it happened earlier than Matthew narrates as Jesus has already healed Gentiles in Matthew's storyline. The first are the two Gadarene demoniacs in the gentile territory across the Jordan. The text does not tell us if they are Jewish or Gentile. However, the Roman centurion, most certainly is a Gentile. This story has many parallels with the Canaanite woman. Both were Gentiles, asked for healing of someone not present, the woman's daughter and the centurion's servant, and they were healed. Although the Greek word is translated as servant in this passage, its primary meaning is child. If this is the case, then both are pleading for their children. The texts are very similar: Jesus says of the centurion that "Truly I

tell you, **in** no one in Israel have I found such faith.” And says to the woman, “great is your faith!” He tells the centurion, ““Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.’ And the servant (or child) was healed in that hour.” And to the woman, ““Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed from that moment.”

So, the puzzle remains, why would Jesus refuse to help this woman when he did the centurion and praised his faith? I wish I had answers for you, but I really only have some more musings. I wonder if we see the humanity of Jesus here. I bet he is tired and maybe a little cranky. After all he just travelled by foot between 56 to 80 km from the Galilee. He had just been debating purity laws with the Pharisees. Maybe those conversations continued on the road with his disciples. Fully focused on the finer points of Jewish law, was his rebuff a kneejerk reaction? I don't know.

I do know that this Canaanite woman was practically invisible. Matthew uses the outdated term Canaanite, versus Mark's use of the term Syrophoenician. He does this to make a point. He wants his audience to hear just how Other this woman is — she comes from the line of their primary enemies. In this time and culture, she is both an outsider and a woman. She had to shout to be heard and noticed. While Jesus ignores her, the disciples get irritated and ask Jesus to send her away. But she is having none of it! She forces Jesus to see and hear her. This unnamed woman uses the diminutive of dog Jesus has just said and doubles it with a diminutive of the word for crumbs. We don't have this in English, but it would sound something like, “Yes, Lord, yet even the puppies eat the crumbies that fall from their masters' table.” Perhaps she is using humour, or maybe it's a bit of ridicule, but she schools Jesus and changes his mind! He is called up short, maybe surprised out of his tired self-absorption and immediately responds with praise for her faith. I find this so

encouraging. Just like Abraham and Lot before her, she argues with the Divine for compassion and mercy, and receives it. When this woman is seen, her desire is granted, and her daughter is healed. It makes me wonder how this story would have been different if the disciples had brought her through the crowd to Jesus instead of trying to push her away?

Humanity has a tendency to create groups of belonging by defining the Other, who belongs and who doesn't. Who's in and who's out. That's where our Gospel reading begins today. Just before this, the pharisees were challenging the disciples right to be "in" because they didn't follow a particular handwashing tradition. Sometimes the Other is actively pushed away, but often they aren't even seen.

And perhaps this is where Paul's words from Romans become especially important for us. The church can never say, "We are in, and therefore they are out." Paul will not allow the Gentile Christians to boast as though they had somehow earned their place at God's table. They have been grafted in by grace. And neither will Paul allow them to say that God has rejected Israel. "The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable."

God's mercy is larger than our boundaries.

That does not mean that differences disappear. Paul does not pretend that Jews and Gentiles are suddenly identical. The Canaanite woman does not become Jewish. The Gentiles do not become Israel. Rather, the astonishing thing is that God's mercy makes room for difference without making difference a barrier to belonging.

Perhaps that is part of what the Kingdom of God looks like: not a place where everyone becomes the same, but a place where no one has to become someone else in order to be welcomed.

Who are we actively excluding from the grace of God today? Who are we not even seeing? Is it your neighbour? Those of other faiths or none at all? Is it other Christians you disagree with, or those with political differences? Newcomers to Canada, or the Indigenous who were here long before any settler arrived? Each one of us is the beloved child of God. Wouldn't it be amazing if we extended God's grace to everyone? If no one was out and everyone belonged? What would that look like? I suggest it would look like the Kingdom of God. As Psalm 133 says, "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!"

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