

Being the Church in the Twilight Zone

Matthew 15:21-28

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, (Aug. 16) 2020

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There is a fifth dimension beyond that which is known to man. It is a dimension as vast as space and timeless as infinity. It is the middle ground between light and shadow, between science and superstition, and it lies between the pit of man's fears and the summit of his knowledge. This is the dimension of imagination. It is an area we call the Twilight Zone.

- Rod Serling, *The Twilight Zone*

In our lesson for this morning, Matthew tells us that Jesus was near Tyre and Sidon – about 40 miles northwest of Galilee – (on the coast of modern Lebanon, south of modern Beirut) which was Gentile country. It is up in border country, where Jews and Gentiles, faithful people of God and pagans, and all sorts of people mix together.

The borderlands are liminal country, the threshold between Jews – God's people, and Gentiles – not God's people. It is where people who know the Bible, follow the rules, and live according to them, are divided from people who couldn't care less about any of that. Yet, in this liminal, border country, much of these people are mixed together. Border country is where it's not this, and it's not that, it's... both/and. The borderlands are transitional country. In ecology, an ecotone is the place where several ecosystems come together and have to integrate. For example, a forest comes down to edge of a river, a wetland. The ecotone is where these two ecosystems begin to come together. Borderlands, ecotones, transition,

the liminal – where we have been in a place of orientation – we know where we are, and now move into a place of disorientation – where we are not sure where we are and what has been normal ain't normal.

Some weeks ago, Steve Chism and I were joking about how it feels as if we're all living in the *Twilight Zone*. Many of you remember the old television show from the late 1950's hosted by Rod Serling, which was about living in the “in-between” dimension, between light and shadow, between the real and the unreal, and so on. The usual premise was somehow to take the everyday, mundane existence and tweak it just a bit, twist it where it was off kilter just enough to become the edge of horror.

We all know about living in the Twilight Zone. Every day we wake up to a kind of twilight zone coming out of the White House. Each morning I feel like I'm hearing the Twilight Zone TV series music, as I ask myself if this is real or not? Add to it, the COVID-19 pandemic and the hundreds of people right here in Nacogdoches who are sick with it. And the need to wear masks so we might protect each other, all the while other people refuse to wear masks to the point of violence, cussing out, or even pulling their ever-present guns because they believe their individual rights are being infringed. At the same time, the pressure to start school is incredible. Some of it, and everyone agrees, that students need to get back to education and they do better in a classroom. But in the rush to getting back to normalcy, we are endangering our teachers and administrators who do not feel safe, as well as students. This same pressure to get back to normalcy shows up in efforts to get the economy going. Again, we agree that people need work and jobs and the ability to pay their bills, but at the same time, we need to be shut down in order to stop this pandemic, to keep people from dying.

Living in the twilight zone.

There is police violence, especially against people of color, and in response the country is rising up in rebellion saying that this is wrong and we're not going to put up with it anymore! Down on the border the wall-building goes on with the separating of families. People are hungry, people are alone, anxiety is going through the roof, people are depressed to the point that health-care providers are seeing an increase in suicides. People need each other; we need community and we cannot get together.

Tell me we're not living in the twilight zone!

So, hear the gospel this morning! Jesus walks directly into the twilight zone! He is with us in this twilight zone. When Jesus goes up to the borderlands near Tyre and Sidon, he is entering a kind of twilight zone, where everything he knew as normal back down in Jewish territory, is not normal anymore. Where he meets people, who are not normal according to his old standards back in small town Galilee.

So, up there on the border, a Canaanite woman who had a sick daughter comes to him shouting for him to cast the demon out of her daughter. Now Matthew is very clear; the woman was a Gentile, a Canaanite, no less. Remember, that the Canaanites were the ancient enemies of the Jews. The land was called "the land of Canaan" in the time of Moses and Joshua. The Land of Canaan was the same as the Promised Land. And if you were a Jew it was the Promised Land just waiting to be taken and moved into. If you were a Canaanite, it was your land and the ancient Israelites were invaders. And it is up there, on the border, on the

boundary between the old and the new, between male and female, between Jew and Gentile, between friend and enemy, between the holy and the demonic, where Jesus goes and finds himself in this odd conversation with an unlikely conversation partner. This is a story about Jesus in the twilight zone.

Now Jesus was a Jew, all of his disciples were Jews, all of his ministry had been with Jews and here comes a Gentile, a Canaanite (an enemy) seeking his healing for her daughter. She begs for his help and Jesus' reply is very unusual. Matthew says at first, Jesus was silent, as if he was ignoring her. And then Jesus is very direct, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." When he said "children" he meant the Jews and when he said "dogs" he was referring to this woman, her daughter, and all Gentiles – including us.

But this woman will not take no for an answer. She is another of those persistent women and she argues with Jesus. She knows what he is saying and is clever enough and persistent enough to turn it around and say, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

Jesus is the master improviser, but he has run into a Canaanite woman who is at least as good as he is. She does not lose her temper with him and she does not turn around and leave. Instead she takes what he says and pivots, improvises it back to him.

And though this Canaanite woman does not know Jesus as God Incarnate, she does recognize him as the Son of David, which means she recognizes him as the Jewish Messiah, God's chosen One. She has the quick-witted, persistent

chutzpah to stand up to God's anointed Messiah because she wants her daughter healed and is willing to out argue the One she recognizes as the Jewish Messiah.

Lo and behold, Jesus changes his mind. He responds to her and heals her daughter...

What do you think about that? This is the only time the Gospels record Jesus changing his mind. What does this mean? Why was it important for the church to remember this story?

I'll tell you what I think. I think realizes that this enemy woman was right. God's abundance is so great that it overflows the table and falls to the Gentiles, too. This Gentile woman helps him realize that the kingdom of God which Jesus proclaims and embodies is bigger than he has ever thought. The kingdom, his ministry, is not just for Jews; but through the Jews it is for all people.

I also think it is interesting that up in provisional territory, Jesus improvises his thinking. When you're living in the twilight zone, you have to learn to improvise.

Remember that to improvise does not mean to make it up out of thin air. It means you have done the hard, preparatory work necessary so that when the unknown comes, you will know what to do or what to say. This Canaanite woman was already aware of what it meant to be the Jewish Messiah and she was already familiar with the Jewish arguments about the "dogs" as the Jews called the Gentiles. So, she was able to improvise in her argument with Jesus and in turn, Jesus improvised his thinking and healed the Canaanite woman's daughter. Jesus

knew his Torah, the Hebrew Scripture, he knew it in his heart and he knew it in his bones, so that when he found himself in provisional territory being challenged to think and do in new ways, he improvised by reaching down into his own storehouse of scripture and lifetime of walking with God, to remember that God's plan has always been to bless others through the blessings bestowed upon God's people. And Jesus knew, that in this moment, in this new and fluid context, he was called to bless a Canaanite.

Sam Wells, the vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields Church in London, said, "Most of the Christian life is faithful preparation for an unknown test" (Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics*, p. 80). That's partly why we worship every Sunday morning. We're rehearsing you over and over and over. Every Sunday, we pray and sing and preach and read about forgiveness and mercy, justice and peace, the Way of the Cross and the Hope of the Resurrection. On and on, every Sunday rehearsing and rehearsing.

Then on a Monday or Tuesday or whatever – at an unexpected time in a surprising way, you will be called upon to improvise the gospel of Christ and act or say or think or respond Christianly.

Or as our narrator said this morning before the sermon, we're a small church going about our normal life and suddenly we find ourselves trying to live in the twilight zone.

Being the church in the Twilight Zone is full of improvisations and improvisation, like genius, is 99% perspiration and 1% inspiration. You rehearse, and practice and work in worship so that you will act like Jesus that one time when

it counts out there during the week. It's one of those times when the newness and light of God breaks into this old pandemic, bigoted, violent, and fear-filled world.

Pope Francis said, "God is not afraid of new things" (Oct. 2014 at the beatification of Pope Paul VI). It is important for us to hear that and remember that as we live in this liminal, transitional time. Everything is changing and God is at work.

I'll be honest. Much of the rage, the fear, the guns and wall building are about trying to hold on to the old: White privilege, nationalism, and our so-called "way of life." When everything feels like it is changing, we want to circle the wagons and hunker down and bunker up. Fix the boundaries. Maintain orthodoxy! Uphold the tradition! So, we tighten our grips on how it "used to be" or hearken back to when we believe America was great, or when, at least, we felt comfortable.

But the Living God is on the move in the middle of this great time of change, and if we follow this God we know in Jesus Christ, we will not react with the temptations to defend our old way of life. Instead, we respond with the way of Jesus we rehearse Sunday after Sunday. God said through the prophet Isaiah, "Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing" (Isa 43:18–19).

Part of our rehearsal is learning to look for, discern, and see where God is at work. Discernment is essential to improvisation. For example, the Canaanite woman discerned that Jesus was the Messiah and that he was the kind of Messiah who would respond to her plea. At the same time, Jesus discerned that in this woman's plea, God was at work.

Jesus discerned, which meant he truly listened to this Gentile woman. At the same time, he truly listened for God. And after a lifetime of listening to God in worship, prayer and scripture, Jesus knew God's voice when he heard it through this Canaanite woman.

Remember this: When we feel like we're in the twilight zone, Jesus is with us and listens to us.

In turn, we learn to listen and pay attention – discern – where and how God is at work around us – even in this twilight zone.

If you haven't already, I invite you to look on the Austin Heights Facebook page or on the webpage at our pictures and video of the work going on our building, or if possible, drive by the building. This past week, I was up there, and several of you have stopped by, as well. When I first walked into the hallway near where the Office door is, I was disoriented and discomforted. Though, I'm well aware of what's going on up there, it was a kind of shock to see the roof removed, and only the trusses remaining. Furthermore, the trusses were being removed, in order for the steel beams to be installed. It was discombobulating.

All that oriented me for 31 years of going through those doors, was disoriented. All order was in disorder. All construction was deconstructed.

But several of you helped me by discerning through the disorientation to seeing the reorientation of God. Light was flooding the sanctuary. Our old ordered world was in disorder, but God was at work reordering.

In the middle of what feels like chaos to many of us, God is reconstructing a new building, a new church, with new ways of serving Christ. What that might look like is too early to tell. As far as our building is concerned, it will look pretty much like it did, especially from the outside. We can't afford to do much more than rebuild it, so it won't fall on us.

But we will include new lighting and wiring and cable and audio/visual capabilities we've never had before, so we can continue to stream online our worship service for so many of you.

I don't know what else we will do or will need to do. All I know is that God is work, the Light is shining through the twilight, and new creation is breaking in. God in Christ is in the middle of this disorienting twilight zone world we're in and is bringing about a reoriented new world. I don't know about you, but that's the world I want to live in.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.