

Sermon - Proper 15, Year A
Jesus and the Canaanite Woman
8/20/23

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the world of human beings, there are walls and there are bridges. Walls hold things together. They keep us safe. They welcome us home. Without walls, we are exposed. Without walls, we cannot always be sure what goes where. Walls tell us that where children are kept safe and educated is a different space than a place where the mail is sorted. Walls can give us definition: “this is the place where I come from.”

But we cannot live in a world that is entirely made from walls. We need bridges too. We need to go places, to learn things, to travel and connect. A life might begin within some walls, but a life worth living will stretch out beyond them.

Both walls and bridges are physical realities, but they are metaphysical too. Walls, we might say, help us define ourselves. We need these metaphysical walls to help us know ourselves – in the generous and good ways – in the pride we might take in being Swedish or Nigerian or a veteran or a resident of Door County. But we also need bridges: quite literally to get to the other side of Sturgeon Bay, but also to get to the fullest understanding of the human experience. We need bridges to teach us about other people. We need them to get to the intellectual and spiritual places we hope to go. We need a bridge to arrive anywhere. And so for all of us, the walls and the bridges together make up the sound architecture of a vibrant life.

The Bible is also a story of walls and of bridges. The whole of the Bible is the story of God’s love for his creation – and how that creation is working out what this means. What does God’s love look like? How far does it go? Who is it meant for? The word used again and again for the full reality of this love is *salvation*. Interestingly, this word finds its origins in Old English

– from the word *sealf*. Sealf meant ointment that heals. I think it is interesting to imagine the Bible as a story of healing. What does God’s healing look like? How far does it go? Who is it meant for?

To help human beings work this all out, we encounter a story of walls and bridges. God has always loved all of creation. From the very beginning of the Book of Genesis, we hear him proclaim it: “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.” But human beings are not God. From the beginning, we have needed help. Like infant children, we needed to begin safe within some walls, and then led ultimately to the liberation and grace of a bridge.

Another Genesis image helps us to imagine this: think of Noah’s ark pitching precariously on the waters that covered the earth. The chaos and destruction of the waves rose, but Noah and his family and all of the animals were kept safe within the walls of the ark. Without the walls, they would have died. But when the waters finally receded, it was a bridge that brought *life* out of the ark and back into the world where it belonged.

And so there came into being some of the noblest walls of all: the walls of the people of Israel. God chose a people out of the world to be the ones that would bring the rest of creation back into the embrace of heaven. Israel was to be set apart – guarded faithfully by wise teachers and led into virtue and knowledge by a series of laws and customs that would protect their particular identity. The Law was given as gift – it was given to align them intimately with God and to knit even the smallest acts of their lives into the fabric of a greater, holier purpose. These were good, strong, vital walls, and all throughout the Old Testament, we see God working faithfully within them.

The Old Testament is a story of sturdy walls, but it is also a story of bridges. Ruth was a Moabite woman (a foreigner from beyond the walls of Israel), but by her courage and her

adopted family's graciousness, she is welcomed into their fold. Rahab, who we meet in the Book of Joshua, was a Canaanite prostitute, and yet her heroic actions saved the Israelite spies and helped secure the future of Israel. The widow of Zarapeth who gives food and shelter to the prophet Elijah – another outsider who extends a bridge between Israel and world beyond. Some say that the Old Testament is unkind to women, but the on-the-ground reality is that the entire corpus gives witness to the fact that the foundations of the bridges of salvation are quite often built by women's hands. It is clear that the walls are important, but there were always meant to be bridges too. It is clear that salvation would come from the house of Israel – but it was always meant to extend to all creation.

And so, from the house of Israel, would come the consummate bridge: Jesus, the Messiah. Jesus would be born securely within the walls of Israel, and his life would be the bridge from God's chosen people to the ends of the earth. This is what we need to understand to understand the full significance of today's slightly unsettling text from the Gospel of Matthew.

Without the full picture, we may get the impression that today's story is about Jesus being insufferably cranky. We might think it is about him being human, even cruel – but while Jesus is indeed fully human, it is vital that we remember that Jesus was like us humans in all ways except sin. He slept and ate and wept and worked, but he did not sin, and so this text is not an exhibition of cruelty.

In this passage, we see a powerful manifestation of the building of a bridge. Jesus and his disciples come from the house of Israel, and Jesus reminds them of this: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But we cannot forget that this entire passage takes place outside the walls! Jesus has led his disciples up into the regions of Tyre and Sidon – these are *Gentile* regions. This is around contemporary Lebanon. The Jews did not live here, and here was

Jesus, traveling deliberately within this region. His presence is building a bridge there, embodying the reality that his message of salvation was already being irrepressibly spread abroad. And another woman is about to build a bridge too.

“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David!” she cries, using a distinctly Jewish address for Jesus. “Son of David, have mercy on me.” She is not from within the walls of the house of Israel, but something about Jesus has called to her. *She believes this man is who others have said he is.* She believes that the terror of her life can be healed by him. And so Jesus reaches out with his mercy. And the woman reaches out with her faith. And together, they build a bridge. Salvation extends from the walls of Israel, across the bridge of mercy and faith, out toward the ends of the earth.

This is the entire story of the Bible. Salvation is a wild and free thing, leading us ever into the country of the unexpected. The story of Jesus meeting the Canaanite woman is an image of the final reality of salvation: our faith, met by His mercy. It is the entire story of the redemption of creation. The walls tell us who we are, and by the bridge – Jesus Christ – God welcomes us home.

Amen.