3/3-4/18 Rev. Amy Haines

Mk 7:24-30, Lk 13:10-17 Foolish Love…is Boundary Breaking Lenten Series

Have you ever expected something to be a certain way, and then was surprised when the reality was the opposite? You expected a concert to cover all of your favorite singer’s greatest hits yet they only sang songs off of their latest release. You hyped up in your mind what you would see and do on a certain vacation and your plans changed drastically once you were there. You dreaded a meeting with your boss yet was pleasantly surprised to find you shared the same priorities on a certain project. You anticipated a blowout for your favorite team but the game was decided at the buzzer.

Have you ever been a rule follower, and felt dismay when others blatantly refuse to follow the rules? My son Nathan hates it when he is waiting to play foursquare and those who get out refuse to go to the back of the line and wait their turn to play again. I have always been amazed at those who spend more time working around the system of federal and local aid and assistance than trying to find and keep an honest job. The trials of such men as Larry Nassar disturb me that so many people act as though the rules that are meant to protect others

don’t apply to them.

I often feel dismay at others refusing to follow rules, then must confess the times when I do not follow the rules, such as posted speed limits on the interstate.

These emotions of dismay and of surprise are evident in both of our Scripture texts today. For once again, through Jesus’ words and actions, we are reminded that God’s ways are not always our ways. God does not always conform to our expectations of how God is supposed to act.

Have you ever said to yourself, or said to your kids or grandkids, “You cannot control another person. You can only control yourself.” We cannot change another person simply by wanting them to change. We also cannot predict how someone else might respond to our experiences and stories, our passions and interests. They may be excited for us, or they may question us.

They may encourage us, or they may dismiss us. In order to seek to control another’s response, often we may limit what we share with others or limit the environment in which we encounter others.

How many of us like to be in control? We like to be in control of our lives, when in fact there is so much in life that we cannot control.

This desire for control can also seep into our faith lives. Have you ever gotten upset when God acts in ways that you do not expect? Have you ever tried to control God? If your first response to that second question is no, consider this:

Have you ever been upset at God when you pray for something, and God doesn’t answer that prayer in the way you expect?

Have you ever been frustrated at God when plot out your life for the next 10 years, telling God where you want to go, then God calls you to go in the opposite direction?

Have you ever felt content in what you are doing now for God, then something in God’s Word, something you hear on the radio or in a sermon, challenges you to do more, and you get upset at God for such a holy nudge?

We are human. We are selfish. We like to be in control.

And we like it when God fits into our nice, neat, safe boxes that we have built to keep God in,

boxes where God acts in ways that we expect God to act.

Then God blows up the box, lets the Holy Spirit loose on our world, and we are never the same again. And how often do we respond first with surprise and dismay, frustration and anger, then hopefully, finally, with obedience and trust.

God is a boundary breaking God. And we see that evident in both of our scriptures today.

In our passage from Luke we find Jesus the Rabbi teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath day. From his place at the front of the synagogue, suddenly Jesus is aware of a woman at the back of the synagogue, in her rightful place with the other Jewish women, a woman who has been crippled by a spirit for 18 long years. She was hunched over, unable to stand straight,

unable to look anyone in the eye. That she was even allowed in worship is a surprise, as she would have been considered unclean with a crippling spirit for that many years.

Jesus saw her. And moved by compassion, he stopped what he was teaching in order to walk to her, lay hands upon her, and heal her. Immediately she straightened up and began to praise God.

Everyone present was amazed—except the synagogue leader. He was indignant. He was incensed. Jesus upset the traditions and rituals of the holy day. Jesus acted out of control of the religious leader.

It would be like the District Superintendent coming in here to preach for worship, and suddenly breaking out in a healing service, or suddenly shaking up everything we expect to happen in our mission and ministry here at First Church.

The leader was furious, and took out his frustration on the woman, even though he was really upset with Jesus. “Woman,” he said, “healing is work. There are six days in which to work. Come on one of those days. Today is the Sabbath, a day made for rest and worship. How dare you defile this day. How dare Jesus move beyond our traditions, beyond the commandments,

to even see her, let alone heal her, here and now and on this holy day.”

What Jesus had done was shocking—seeing her, touching her, healing her on the Sabbath,

restoring her to wholeness as a beloved daughter of Abraham.

Yet all that Jesus had done was not against God’s law of love, God’s heart of compassion, God’s boundary breaking ways. And Jesus spoke up and said so.

Jesus had come to the children of Israel not to abolish the Jewish law, but to fulfill it. Suddenly, beyond all rules and regulations, Jesus had returned to the heart of the law—a way of organizing community in order that all may find life, and life abundant.

Imagine the poor quality of life this woman had lived for 18 long years. How many people do you know that appear to be beaten down by life, by health or anxiety, by struggle or sorrow, until they know no other life, and live with no hope or confidence or even yearning for something better?

Yet God sees us, even when beaten down by the world, when crippled by the spirits and struggle around us. God sees us, and calls to us and heals us. Yes, the healing is not always physical. While this woman’s back was straightened, more importantly she was restored to the community of faith. Imagine the challenge for her of living into a new identity, of reclaiming her place within the community of faith!

Several years ago Rev. Michael Curry shared his experience of visiting daycare centers in Botswana in Southern Africa, centers run by the Anglican Diocese of Botswana. He shared:

The last daycare center that we visited on our trip was at St. Peter's Church in Gaborone, the capital city. It's located in an impoverished section of the capital.

Upon our arrival we were greeted by Fr. Andrew, the priest, and his wife, who then took us to the far side of the courtyard where the children were sitting. They were sitting in the shade listening to Bible stories and singing songs. Now these are kids three, four, and maybe five years old. Fr. Andrew introduced us, and we said good morning to the kids, and he invited me to tell them a story. I told them a Bible story and led them in a song.

Father then dismissed the children to go play. Off they went, running as children do on a playground, all except this one little girl. She got up from her chair, took her crutches, and started to walk painfully, almost like the old woman in the Gospel story. And as she walked, I asked Father who she was and what her story was. And he said the director of the daycare,

who was a college student at the time, goes into the neighborhoods looking for children who may not be being cared for, who may need the daycare center. She heard about this child in one home where her grandparents were caring for her. The child was actually bedridden. And the grandparents allowed the church and the daycare center to intervene, and so they came in, and eventually medical folk and physical therapists worked with her and medicine helped, and they brought her to the daycare center every day. Slowly, but surely, she was able to walk with the crutches.

While Father was telling that story, she was walking with the crutches toward the other children, and she fell down. You know how you want to get up and help, but you also learn the best way to help is to let her get up herself.  And she did.

She took one of the crutches, kind of staked it in the ground and pulled herself up, continued to walk painfully, haltingly, but determinedly, toward the other children. And as she approached the other children, Father said, "We believe that God has something better in store for every child. And it's our job to help each child find out what that is, and then rise up and live."

-Michael Curry “God Has a Dream” 8-25-13 day1.org adapted

Rise up and live. That is God’s desire for all of us.

In our passage from Luke Jesus heals a daughter of Abraham, a faithful Jew. Yet in our passage from Mark we see God make a surprising move to extend the kingdom of God beyond the Jews to the Gentiles. In first century Israel this would have been a scandalous move by God, to suddenly proclaim grace to all people, not only Jew but also Gentile.

Because you and I are Gentiles, because we know how Paul expanded the church across the Roman Empire, this news is not as boundary breaking to us as it would have been to Mark’s first hearers.

Jesus had gone away to the region of Tyre, to modern day Lebanon, to Gentile territory, to get away from the crowds who followed him day and night. Jesus was divine, yet he was also human. He needed regular times apart to pray and recharge, yet as his followers grew, Jesus found it harder to get away for what I would consider Sabbath rest.

Soon after Jesus arrived in Tyre, so did word of his presence there. Although he did not want to be disturbed, a Syrophoenician woman dared to approach him, fall at his feet, and beg him to heal her demon possessed daughter. She was determined to save her daughter, like most mothers would be.

Yet this woman, in daring to even approach to Jesus, broke about every societal boundary

that was present between her and Jesus to beg for the life of her daughter. She was a Gentile, a non-Jew. She was a Greek, Syrophoenician by birth, so we can assume she worshipped the Greek gods and goddesses, not God Almighty. She was a woman bold enough to speak up

when women were not allowed to speak to any man except those in her own household.

She had a demon possessed daughter which would have turned her family into outcasts.

By all societal boundaries, this woman had absolutely no right to be in Jesus’ presence, let alone have the boldness to beg him to heal her daughter. She knew it. And Jesus knew it.

And Jesus’ initial response was an ethnic slur. “Woman, my time in not yet. The children of Israel must be fed first. It isn’t fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs seeking scraps under the table.” Jews regularly called Gentiles dogs. Yet these dogs would not be like our pets today. These dogs would have been scavengers, street dogs, fighting for every scrap of food and territory. While Jesus’ language was more in line with puppies, puppies still were seen as less than in the eyes of the Jews.

While the words are harsh to our ears, the woman took no offense. She knew her place in society, and instead of responding in kind, simply replied, “Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” She knew her place. She knew she was not of the chosen race. Yet she chose to believe that Jesus’ love, mercy and compassion was greater than any societal boundaries that divided them.

Jesus, true to his nature, replied with grace, “For saying that, you may go home—the demon has left your daughter.” And trusting his word, she went home, and found her child healed as Jesus said she would be.

While we are shocked at Jesus’ words, words that other Jews would not have thought twice about, we expected the healing. I wonder if the first disciples, upon hearing this story,

were less shocked at the words and more shocked at the healing. For once again, a boundary had been crossed—and this the greatest boundary they knew. For now the kingdom of God had been opened to the Gentiles. Now God’s compassion and love was being offered to those beyond God’s chosen people. Now, all people were God’s beloved.

Once God had broken down the boundary between Jew and Gentile, there was no stopping God. Instead of returning immediately to Galilee and Jewish territory, Jesus actually moved deeper into Gentile territory, healing a deaf man, feeding 4,000, and planting seeds that later took root under Paul’s passionate leadership.

Taking the good news of God’s grace and love to Gentiles may have been the most shocking boundary to have been broken in the Gospel of Mark, and I for one am thankful of God’s boundary breaking ways that allow you and I to worship here today.

Our God is a boundary breaking God, when those boundaries exclude and diminish and judge on appearances. God is inviting us to be boundary breakers, not necessarily rule breakers. Our rules and laws and customs are meant to form us and protect us as a community. Yet there are times when the boundaries within those rules must be expanded to welcome more people into our community.

Some of you are old enough or come from another faith tradition where women were not welcome to share their gifts and call in leadership and ministry. Some of you can remember when a divorcee’s leadership was questioned if they could not keep their own house in order.

We still have issues in this country where the leadership of people of color is not welcomed in the church. I once had a church member look at me and say that he was more open to a woman than a man of color. Currently our denomination is struggling over whether or not to receive

the gifts and call of those who identify as LGBTQ.

What boundaries are God inviting us to break down today, beginning in our own hearts?

I almost changed this sermon midweek last week, as God began to work on my boundaries and prejudices and assumptions. I know that I still have boundaries God is breaking down in my heart and mind. Boundaries are often put in place from fear of the other, to set limits on who is an insider and who is an outsider. Boundaries are often put in place so that we feel safe from the other, whoever that other may be that we are not sure about getting to know.

Who are the outsiders, the outcasts, the burdened, the lonely, the struggling, the abused, the rejected God calls us to see and welcome today? Who are the beloved sons and daughters of God who live and work and play among us that we are too afraid to get to know, yet who also yearn for the good news of God’s foolish love for them?

We all have self-imposed and societal boundaries to break. Are we willing for God to work within us and among us to be witnesses to Gods’ foolish, boundary-shattering love and grace and mercy?

In a moment we will gather to partake in the sacrament of Holy Communion, and in our faith tradition everyone is welcome to partake of the elements of bread and cup; everyone is welcome to receive this holy mystery of God’s grace. As we give thanks for Jesus’ sacrificial love poured out for all of us, his willingness to suffer and die on the cross for our sins, we once again give thanks for the boundary breaking foolish love of God. For God broke the bonds of sin and death through Jesus’ death and resurrection. God continues to break our bonds of despair and struggle by offering hope and transformation.

In the Episcopal church, from 1928 to 1978 the following prayer preceded Holy Communion:

*We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord,*

*trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies.*

*We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table.*

*But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy…”*

-1928 Book of Common Prayer quoted in

“Not Worthy to Gather Up the Crumbs” 9-9-12 ammaguthrie.wordpress.com

Like the Syrophoenician woman who knew she was not worthy of Jesus’ welcome, yet sought it out anyway, we come to the table today knowing that we are all sinners in need of grace, all men and women caught up in the boundaries that separate us, yet all who are loved by God.

So we come once again to be claimed and called, to be forgiven and freed, trusting in God who breaks bonds and expands boundaries so that all are welcome at the table, all are welcome to come to Jesus, all are worthy to receive grace.

We come to be fed, to be renewed, then to be sent forth as God’s boundary breaking people in this world. Go and love God. Go and love your neighbor. Go and share with all you meet the good news of God’s grace for all. Give thanks that God’s ways are not our ways, and be open to God moving in and through and among us.