



Pastor Ken's Sermon

SERMON - 11TH PENTECOST

MATTHEW 15:21-28

AUGUST 16, 2020

"CONDITIONED TO IGNORE...COMMISSIONED TO INVITE"

In my first parish, we had a ministerial association - pastors who'd meet every now and then to pray together, "talk shop", rough out plans for an annual sacred music songfest during the county fair, and keep our congregations aware of our food shelf. We pastors were the first call for help if someone needed it. Most of the time, that meant someone who by one set of complex circumstances or another made their way to the confluence of US highway 281 and state highway 12, otherwise known as Spencer, Nebraska, and tried to make those circumstances a bit more bearable by asking for a church and a pastor.

Most of the "transients" were men and rolled into town in cars held together with wire and tape. Most asked for a bed to sleep on for the night, so we'd call over to the Skyline Motel and the owner would usually say "yes" then it was off to the Tin Man Café. I wasn't always in the best of moods when one showed up at my church or got sent to the parsonage after asking around at the Cenex station up the block. But most took just about an hour of your time to get them settled into the motel, hear their story, and scratch your head over how someone could get so twisted up in this life. Then they were off, disappearing into the next morning.

But one gentleman I remember well, because he was, incredibly, on foot, heading from Ohio to Arizona and evidently thinking he had a better shot at it by making his way South by first heading North. The café owner didn't mind feeding our guests, but when she was tending the place alone, she asked if we pastors would stick around till they were through. So, I nursed a cup of coffee while my afternoon guest downed a couple of cheeseburgers and a malt. He was sort of edgy the whole time, his conversation circular, his concentration pretty much limited to his meal, but if you were hungry, I suppose that made sense. He kept his suitcase on his lap the whole time. The next morning, I stopped by the motel to see him off, took him over for some breakfast, and he asked if I could get him a new pair of socks, a cap, and some "chap-stick" for his sun and wind dried lips. When I got back, I offered him a Bible and have a prayer with him if he wanted. He did, but then asked if I would give him a lift to the next town. I agreed.

He got in my car, and I offered to put his suitcase in the backseat as we drove 10 miles to Butte, the next town west. But he insisted on keeping it on his lap, staring at it like he had his dinner the night before and that made me nervous. I started thinking that in addition to a wandering soul - he might be an unstable mind. My car I didn't care much about if he took it, and I knew enough people in Butte to get a ride home if need be, but I didn't want to get shot. It was only Thursday morning and I didn't have my sermon for Sunday done yet. I got him to Butte, glad that by this time in my call I knew the road and its curves because I tell you I hardly ever took my eye off that suitcase of his the whole 10 miles!

Returning to Spencer and my sermon, I thought about the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman. This lady might have seemed a bother to his disciples - those fellows seem to have had only a once size fits all solution to human need - send those needy humans away! Then again, it seems Jesus knew she just what they needed.

No sense speculating on how but she knew that the vision of God for the world included her (if indeed it includes anyone), the compassion of God had room for her daughter, and the power of God the wherewithal to do something

about what hurts in this world. It's not clear if she'd ever read Isaiah 56 about foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord or memorized Psalm 67 with its promise "let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you rule the peoples justly and guide the nations of the earth", but then it's not clear that the disciples who should have known these passages did either. It's good to know your Bible, and even better to do what it says.

But she believed that Christ could help her, that God could change things in her life, and in that apparently her faith was greater than that of the Bible reading disciples'. And that is where this story comes full circle toward you and I. We are conditioned to ignore some folks, but as Christians we are commissioned to serve them for Jesus' sake and believe that when God changes things for the better for them he does so for us all. We have been conditioned to keep some folks at a healthy distance. But how do you do that and at the same time fulfill the pinnacle of Matthew's story – that thing we call the Great Commission?

Now we could easily pause here and rehearse what has become a tiresome ritual of figuring out who is schooling whom these days in the true love of God – virtually anybody could give you 3 or 4 categories of people who have either been shamelessly excluded from the church or who are the ones responsible for folks choosing to stay away from the church. Everyone has someone they keep an eye on or have formed an opinion about these days, and that may be our biggest challenge of all – because the only opinion that ought to matter is the one God has formed of us.

Yet we often look at "others", and I repeat you probably have some of your own and are on someone else's list, nervously or angrily, like the disciples of Jesus did, like I did when I gave a ride to a gentleman whose name I've long forgotten but whose *suitcase* I never will. Folks all with baggage – some is just more evident than others. But men and women who we've been conditioned to ignore and be wary of, Jesus commissions us to invite, welcome, and witness to, doing our best to include them in our hamlet of the kingdom of God as we have been included.

Every last one of us as our lesson from Romans says have been disobedient, every one of us started off life "far off" from God but live under what Paul calls "an irrevocable gift and call." You all know in our country we've got an election coming up – and that means some folks are going to be "unelected". That never happens to someone elected by God – the Jew first in a manner that perplexed Paul but which he conceded God and God alone will work out - but also those of us elected to salvation by the decision Jesus made to die on a cross.

A Christian is nothing other than a person who a holy God could have easily ignored, to whom instead he gave peace, purpose and possibility by means of one rather simple confession – "*Lord help me.*" Sometimes that's all the faith a person can muster – but then again, it seems that's all it takes for the ears of Jesus to perk up and his mercy to kick in.

AMEN