



Roanoke, Virginia
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“I Belong”

Matthew 15:21-28
George C. Anderson

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” ²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” ²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” ²⁶ He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” ²⁷ She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

I enjoy listening to audiobooks. But I have found that it is expensive for preachers to do this when they listen to books they later want to reference for sermons. Quotes are hard to find using reverse and fast forward. So, I end up buying the book again, only in print.

I want to tell you about two books that I have bought twice.

The first book is by Brene Brown. Some of you know her because you have seen her Ted Talk on vulnerability, one of the top five Ted Talks most viewed. Her books are widely read as well. The one I just finished listening to, and then purchased again to have it in print, is *Braving the Wilderness; the Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*.

In the introduction, Brown talks about reading as a college student Maya Angelou’s poem, “Still I Rise.” Brown became an instant fan and collected every Angelou book, poem, essay and interview she could find.

Which is why Brown was surprised and upset to hear Angelou say this in a 1973 interview with Bill Moyers:

“You are only free when you realize you belong no place- you belong every place- no place at all. The price is too high. The reward is great.”¹

When Brown heard that quote she thought: “That’s just wrong.” All Brown’s research and experience told her so. Her research revealed that we only know ourselves in relation to others-

¹ Brown, Brene, *Braving the Wilderness*, p. 4.

that all of us, if we are going to be healthy, need communities in which we belong. Her experience taught her the same. Brown's High School years were painful because she did not know where she belonged or to whom. She felt estranged even from her family. At that time, she would have said that she belonged only to herself, but that led to poor choices, bad behavior and personal misery. Not belonging wasn't Brown's liberation. It was agony.

The woman who approaches Jesus in our passage knows that agony of not belonging. She is a Canaanite in a Jewish world and a woman in a man's world. Her daughter is in a bad way and the mother cannot help her on her own. She joins the crowd surrounding Jesus and yells for mercy.

What happens next is the painful part of the story. Her yelling irritates his disciples enough to lead them to ask Jesus to send her away. Jesus agrees with them. He agrees that the priority of his ministry is his own people; the Jews. It is not that others don't matter, but "family first"... if you can stretch your definition of family to an entire nation or race.

But the Canaanite woman won't go away. She manages to work her way directly in front of Jesus making him see her and hear her. "Help me!"

Jesus explains to her his priorities: "It is not fair to feed the pets if the children haven't been fed." That sounds harsh, but it also sounds human. Every one of us have loyalties and priorities when it comes to our resources. We can't be all things to all people all the time.

The Canaanite woman knows she doesn't belong. She doesn't argue that point: that in Jesus' and the disciples' eyes, she is "not one of us." How can she? But what she has seen in the human Jesus is the image of God, and she can't accept that there is no place at God's table of grace for her. So she says, "Even pets get to eat scraps from the table, don't they?"

Let's freeze the story here. I recently talked about this story in a sermon and I know I am repeating myself. But I chose to return to it so early because of this moment we have frozen. Let's study it. At this moment, the Canaanite woman belongs to no one.

And yet, it is her choice. She is choosing to stand alone. If, before this point she had decided to disappear into the crowd, to fit in, she would be acceptable to the disciples. She even would be appreciated, perhaps, for showing up, for being one of the many who have gathered demonstrating that Jesus is onto something. But her daughter would still be in a bad way.

So, there is courage on display in this moment. The Canaanite woman is not accepting the role the disciples have assigned her to simply blend in with the crowd and not get in the way.

Make no mistake. She still needs to belong, as we all do. But she is bravely standing alone because she needs to belong to a community that will see her and her daughter for who they are. She is not going to stop being a Canaanite woman, but she still needs a place at God's table where there is grace to be given and mercy to be shared.

This passage would be a good one I think to share with Middle School students. I got this idea listening to Brene Brown tell of interviews she had with Middle School students. Middle School students as emerging adults feel acutely this need to find "their people," to be a part of a group that gives them an identity outside their home. They experience both the bad and the good of belonging, how being part of a group can tear them down or build them up,

how in one group you have to hide your true self in order to be accepted-

disappear in a way-

and in another group you feel seen and accepted.

For Middle School students, the difference might better be described as the difference between really belonging and simply fitting in.

- A Middle School student knows that “If I have to be like you, I fit in.” But “If I really belong, I am included as I am.”

The Canaanite woman can't fit in as a Jew. In strict ethnic terms, the “pet” can't pretend to be the “child.” But she yearns to be welcomed at the table of grace as she is, even if it means eating scraps that fall from the table.

- Middle School students know that fitting in is blending into the crowd. It is being a part of the background so that those who matter can stand out.

The disciples do not mind the Canaanite woman being a face in the crowd. The adoring crowd validates the disciples being at the center of something significant, leading a movement that is important. But for the woman to remain in the crowd watching Jesus and the disciples go by is for her to watch life and not find it. It is like those who *live vicariously* through a king, or a celebrity, or a favorite politician. Living vicariously won't work for the woman whose daughter need direct, not vicarious, attention. Put another way, the woman doesn't want to live vicariously *even through Jesus*. She wants to *find life* in Jesus.

- Middle School students know the difference between having their fears and anxieties manipulated so they will do what others want them to do, and being able to relax among others because they can be themselves.

That is why Middle School students would not be happy if we remain frozen where we are in the story, because at this frozen point, the woman has to accept being a pet in the household..., receiving attention only under certain terms.

The miracle of this story is that after the Canaanite accepts being a pet if only she could get some scraps from the table, Jesus then sees her **not** as a pet but *as a child*. Before, you see, Jesus defined a child as a child of Abraham. Now he sees a child of God, fully acceptable in God's sight.

In fact, she has the faith he has been looking for in the children of Abraham. “You have great faith,” he says to her. You have the faith I have been praying to see in fellow Jews. Your daughter is healed.”

Jesus makes a family connection and it has nothing to do with race or even religion. He sees her because she has appealed to a transcendent human principle, compassion; and inspired in Jesus a transcendent, human response, empathy.

What the Canaanite woman can teach us is first that being alone and belonging are not exclusive. In fact, it is only when one is truly oneself can one really belong anywhere or with anyone in any healthy way.

Second, she teaches us that true community- true communion- involves not just acceptance, but something transcendent. It involves mercy and compassion. Justice perhaps.

It is nice that she finds acceptance in the eyes of Jesus as another human being. That seems to be what everyone is saying in urging toleration. But remember that this woman is not simply seeking an acceptance, a place at the table, but transformation, healing for her daughter (which, for a mother, means healing for herself).

If that is a bit unclear, then know that I wrote this conclusion at 3:00 this morning. To explain what I am trying to say, let me bring in the other audiobook I listened to and then had to buy so I could study it in print; *The Happiness Hypothesis* by Jonathan Haidt. Haidt agrees with Brown: to be healthy in life is to both be yourself and belong. He also is a social scientist and his research has shown that the best path to what he calls happiness, but which I would call “healthy wellbeing,” is to belong to a community that helps you become a better self by connecting you with others, with the world and with God.

He says:

“...the most important lesson I have learned in my twenty years of research on morality is that nearly all people are morally motivated. Selfishness is a powerful force, particularly in the decisions of individuals, but whenever groups of people come together to make a sustained effort to change the world, you can bet that they are pursuing a vision of virtue, justice, or sacredness.”²

What is amazing about Haidt’s conclusion is that he is agnostic. He can’t call himself a believer. Yet, his research did not reveal what he had assumed it would when he was a philosophy major in college: that religion is a negative force in the world leading to self-negation and denial. Sure there are unhealthy faith communities, communities that prey on people’s insecurities and fears to keep them in line. And certainly there are plenty of people who justify all kinds of bad things in God’s name- but that’s not really religion. That actually is slander against religion and against God.

Haidt’s research has shown him that to be what he calls ‘happy,’ we need to find that transcendent connection that Jesus has with the woman. We need to be connected to transcendent values of justice, compassion, kindness (I could go on); those things that enforce the boundaries and heal the wounds that keep a community together and allow the human race to survive, and sometimes thrive. We need communities that shape us morally and ethically so that we can treat each other as Jesus and the woman treat each other, a way that looks beyond differences to what binds us together.

Based on his studies, Haidt doesn’t see much success in communities that try to do this without some affirmation of a transcendent being, God. If there is a just God, then justice is not something we make up just to survive. If there is a kind God, a merciful God, a reconciling God, then kindness, mercy and reconciliation are not things we make up to keep folks from killing each other.

Faith communities that tell us
that life matters
and that we matter
and that it matters how we treat each other
and it is all because we matter to God

² Haidt, p. 241.

are the best the world has been able to come up with to help individuals find happiness apart and together.

I am sorry Haidt can't yet believe, but I love his research.

A church, at its best, is a kind of community that offers the kind of belonging Brown and Haidt describe and which the Canaanite woman finds in Jesus. The church is a place that honors transcendent values.

- In church we can confess who we are, even our sins, and find ourselves acceptable in God's sight. We can find our best selves by seeing ourselves as God sees us. As Nancy Barbour said in a telephone conversation I had with her this past week, "I would never have found out who I was by myself. Everyone ought to belong to a community that can do that for them."
- In church, we can learn to see others, and we can learn with others despite our differences, because we learn to honor the transcendent values that keep us alive... that keeps us alive in the best sense of what it means to be alive-
 - loving ourselves-
 - loving ourselves because God loves us-
 - loving others as God loves us... and because God loves them.

This is the Sunday where we present the Annual Report. The printed report was mailed to members and copies are available here at the church. It contains data; our membership, the names of those who died and the names of those who were born, our budget, how much we took in and how much we spent.... To read the report and to hear the information that Joe Miller will offer is to see only the surface of what it means to be this community. It is what we look like on the outside.

But look underneath. What is underneath is a community that is about human formation and social transformation. It is about a community where the miracle of the Canaanite woman keeps happening:

Individuals finding a place where they can be alone before God, and then be with each other at God's table; a place where by grace people find their best selves and then find a way to be a means of graceful transformation in the world.