

Matthew 15:10-28 Pastor Bill Uetricht 11 Pentecost 8/16/20

One morning this past week, an incredible young man from our congregation and I went on a bike ride together. The ride led to conversation of all kinds, including some reflection on what it means to grow up, leave home, discover home again. In the conversation, I referenced the work of Richard Rohr who recently in his meditations has been speaking about this universal pattern that is the journey of life and ultimately faith. It's the pattern of order, disorder, and reorder. Growing up, maturing often involves moving through that pattern. Leaving home is often a matter of ordering, disordering, and reordering. Life in God (call it "salvation" or growth in love) frequently follows that pattern.

Let's talk about order, first of all. It's an essential part of the beginning of life, the beginning of faith. Children need order. They need a sense of home, a sense of belonging. They need to know that life is reliable, that people can be depended upon. They need clear stories and direction that help them define life and their place in it. They need boundaries. Without them, they often falter. Without what Rohr calls a good, solid "container" they often struggle with themselves and others as life evolves.

Now don't get me wrong. I don't want you to think that children and human beings in general are not resilient, that they cannot overcome bad upbringing. They can. They do. But order is a very good place to start.

It's true in religion, by the way. I really struggle with those—and they are legion these days—who say that they don't want to force any kind of religion on their kids or make them come to church. They want them choose for themselves. But if they are not exposed to something, if they are not provided a tradition, rituals, consistent stories, expectations for behavior, how can they *choose*? What are they

choosing from? Kids need a solid container. They need some kind of order that traditions can bring them. We all do.

I am eternally grateful for the stability that my family provided me. I rather like the Lutheranism that they exposed me to and indoctrinated me with. I am glad I learned my lessons well, that I know how to defend the world view that is my container.

You get the sense from the Bible that Jesus was given a strong container. He was a Jew, a learned one, a rabbi, Matthew would have us know. He, without a doubt, knew where he came from. I suspect he learned his lessons well. He knew the commandments, the ones that were written down, and the ones that were passed on through oral tradition. In the Gospel of Matthew, he is so entrenched in his own people, in what we would call *home*, that when a foreign woman comes to him on behalf of her daughter who is possessed by a demon, he won't talk to her. She's not a part of the club. But she's got a problem, and so she says, "kyrie eleison," have mercy on me, Son of David, i.e., a true Jew. But Matthew tells us, he...did...not...answer...her at all.

Jesus had a good container. He knew who he was. He knew what it meant to be a good Jew. And a good Jew doesn't talk to a woman. A good Jew especially doesn't talk to a foreign woman who represents the arch enemy of Israel, the Canaanites.

One of the things that a good container, well-defined boundaries, stability, a deep and lasting commitment to one's own religion does to us is to create a world of us and them. It's normal. You often don't know who you are if you don't know you aren't. When I was growing up, I knew that I wasn't a Catholic or somebody from Kentucky. Frankly, I am not sure we knew what it really meant to be Lutheran or to be from Cincinnati, but we certainly knew we weren't Catholic or weren't Kentuckian.

Now one of the realities that accompanies this kind of order is what could be called *purity*. In a very ordered world, we develop strict notions about what it means to be who we are. To be Lutheran—and of course this came through the lens of my Mom—we did not play bingo or go to church festivals, and while we drank, we didn't drink too much. Purity is common for religion in the "order" stage.

Purity often represents first-stage of life thinking. Frankly, it's probably helpful for children. It serves them to learn that "you just don't do that." Who you are means you just don't do that and you do do this.

Jesus had learned the purity tradition of his religion. But to be honest with you, he seemed not overly fond of that tradition, or at least he wanted to transform it. (Uh oh! **Disorder!**) In Matthew today, he is struggling with that tradition as it had come to him through the oral law—that is, the interpretations of the teachers of religion, and in this case, the Pharisees. They taught about clean and unclean foods. They taught about the significance of the ceremonial washing of hands. They focused on those purity rituals that made it quite clear who they as a people were vis a vis other people. We're Jews we don't eat ham sandwiches. We are Catholic we don't eat meat in Lent.

But Jesus takes on these purity rituals and disorders people's lives. "Listen and understand," he says. "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth that defiles. Then the disciples approached and said to him, 'Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?'"

But Jesus doesn't care. He's strong enough to take on the religious leaders, to unsettle them and unsettle us. Ceremonial, ritual purity—they, he believes, are not as significant as the weightier matters. Really bad stuff comes from really bad insides, not from eating the wrong kinds of food or from not washing your hands in some

kind of elaborate ritual ceremony. This teaching threw people into great disorder. To follow him is to become dis-ordered.

And in our reading for today, Jesus himself experiences that disordering. He has to deal with what he was taught or how he has viewed himself in light of what he was taught. Jesus not only disorders; he himself is disordered. After he refuses to answer the Canaanite woman, he tells his disciples, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." His mission is narrow. She's an intrusion. Jesus is in the *order* stage.

But this pugnacious foreign woman, takes him on. "Lord, help me," she says. He responds with a prejudicial comment: "It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." "Dog" is an ethnic slur for Gentiles. They are considered less than fully human. But the woman knows better, it seems, and besides, she is a mom who is like a dog on a bone. Her daughter is sick, and Jesus can help. His prejudice isn't going to stop her. She responds: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." You may need to dismiss me for who I am, but you have what I want, and I am not going to stop at your prejudice.

And then Jesus says: "Woman, great is your faith." *Great* is your faith. No other person in the gospel of Matthew is said to have *great* faith. Many times, including last week, the disciples were said to be people of *little* faith. This foreigner has great faith. And Jesus is forever changed. His mission will now include the Gentiles, so much so that the last words he will speak to his disciples will be, "Go to all the Gentiles. Go to all the nations." The ministry of the church includes the whole world. Order has gone through disorder to discover a new order, reordering.

Yes, it all often starts at home with order. And home can be a very good place. Order can be a good thing. But life with Jesus will

disorder your life. It will not allow you to be content simply with where you came from. It will take you away from home. It won't let you be satisfied with keeping anybody out—the foreigners or even the home-town folks. For Paul today, the struggle is with the home-town folks. In Romans, he concludes that God will not write off his people, the Jews, even though they have not fully received Jesus. God doesn't write anybody off. God is the God of the nations, the world. As the Psalmist says today, "Let the *peoples* praise you, O God; let *all* the nations praise you."

That kind of God unsettles our small little gods, the gods of our groups and tribes. That God disorders our lives. But truthfully, to be discovered by that God is to discover a reordering of our lives that takes us to our true home. And in that home, we all find a place, we all find rest. In God, we *all* sit down at the table of mercy and grace. And yes, that's a new place, but man, is it good!