

**August 16, 2020**

**Carol's reflection on Matthew 15:21-28**

Do you ever read the ending of a book before you are finished it?

Perhaps you want to find out if a favourite character will be around at the end – or if some part of a mystery will be solved.

Perhaps you want to do that with Matthew's Gospel this week.

You might want to read the last words of Jesus –

***And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."***

That's the Jesus we know and love. And maybe glimpsing the ending will help us to face today.

We have before us an uncomfortable and unpleasant story of Jesus.

In this day when we are acutely aware of the importance of physical boundaries (2 metres here, 6 feet there --), and cleanliness (wash your hands) this is a story full of boundaries and cleanliness.

There is the boundary of gender – men did not speak to women who were not their wives – and the one of religion – Jews did not speak to Gentiles – and the one of geography – Israelites did not speak to Canaanites.

When the story starts, Jesus has already crossed the border of geography – seemingly by his own free will.

And then the Canaanite woman crosses a boundary next. She speaks to him. But he does not answer. The disciples encourage him to cross the boundary and speak to her in order to send her away – and he does – citing the boundary of religion. He says "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

But she will not be discouraged. She kneels before him and addresses him, "Lord, help me". But he is stuck with the boundaries that divide. He states: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Ouch – are not all of us children of God? If we have read the last words of Jesus the end of the Gospel, we know that is what Jesus will say. But it is not what he says here.

She has a quick reply – “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

She does not disagree with him, but she names a way that she can still have healing for her daughter. She needs Jesus to brush a crumb from his table over the boundary to her.

And, it is as if the veil is lifted and the possibility of crossing this boundary is made clear – the woman is acknowledged for the greatness of her faith and her daughter is healed.

It is as if the whole of Jesus’ ministry can open up at this moment. A short while ago the disciples were in a boat and Jesus was walking on the water and Peter was sinking in the water as he attempted to come to Jesus and Jesus said “Oh ye of little faith.” And here is this foreign Gentile woman, this triple outsider, of whom Jesus says “Woman, great is your faith!”

This uncomfortable and unpleasant story offers us the moment of transformation.

Matthew is writing for a Jewish community that included a focus on boundaries and on purity and cleanliness and here is the story that stretches everything. Boundaries are crossed. And for those around, it is a lesson in perseverance and a lesson in grace.

Perhaps one of the gifts of this story placed in the middle of the Gospel is just that – it is in the middle. Jesus’ ministry is not clear from the beginning. There is room for change and openness. There is room for learning and transformation.

And, if our Christian faith invites us to follow the way of Jesus, then maybe this story that involves transformation and learning is really good news for us. We can learn and change too. We can adjust our way of thinking. We can act for others.

COVID-19 has turned our world upside down. When we closed the church building in March, we thought that everything would be back to ‘normal’ by the end of June. Clearly, that is not so, and there is not a place we can look into the future – to read the end of the story – from where we are today. Instead, we are in the middle. With our transformation of our own behaviours in the COVID world. With the distancing, and the masks, and the worry.

In all this, we also know that God is with us. We may not know the future, but we are here in the present, with all its uncertainty, and with the certainty of God.

God is with us, we are not alone. The words of Jesus’ echo in our hearts and minds:

***And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”***

Thanks be to God. Amen