

Sunday, August 16, 2020
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. Dr. Mary Brennan Thorpe
Matt. 15:21-28 “In the DMZ”

If you visit the Holy Land these days, particularly if you travel outside of the city of Jerusalem to some of the ancient sites of Nazareth, Jericho, Bethlehem and Magdala, it's impossible to ignore the military checkpoints where new Jewish settlements border the Palestinian communities in the occupied territories. Your bus might pass through things that look like tollbooths but they are stopping points. The Israeli guards check your papers. You might see watchtowers with snipers. And as you drive out to the access point of the River Jordan, where you can step into the warm muddy water as those who were baptized by John the Baptist did, you see warning signs saying that you should not go off the paved road. There are minefields.

It is a strange thing, visiting a place where borders are so obvious, where the risks attendant to dallying in those spaces on the edge of difference are named so starkly.

We have some familiarity with such border territory from more recent history: the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Korea is still a high-risk passage point. Few cross it. Despite the title “Demilitarized,” military from both the north and south Korean armies are visible, with something akin to a bridge between those two nations, nations, that a half century or more after active hostilities were ended, are still technically at war. You may recall that there was a meeting between President Trump and Kim Jong-Un, a little more than a year ago. Watching video of that meeting, you get a sense of the “nowhere-ness” of that in-between space.

Stepping into such a space, a DMZ, is risky. The side with which you are aligned cannot step in to protect you. The side with which you are not aligned sees you as an interloper heading in their direction. You are floating in nowhere-ness.

And that is precisely the “nowhere-ness” that Jesus enters into in today’s Gospel passage. Remember where this passage sits in the arc of Jesus’ story: he’s just had another theological arm-wrestle with the Pharisees, and the tensions are growing ever higher between him and the established authorities. So he gets out of town, so far out of town that he is in an area that is disputed land between the Canaanite territory and Israel. It’s a dangerous place, but for the moment it’s safer than where Jesus was before...

...until he is approached by someone who is exactly the wrong kind of person to interact with. A woman unaccompanied. A Canaanite woman. Canaanites were “other” – thought of as false followers of the one true God. Because of that, Jews classified them as Gentile. But here’s something that has been forgotten: Jesus had three foremothers who were Canaanite women: Rahab, Tamar and Ruth. So perhaps this stranger, this outsider, this Canaanite woman hails him as a kind of relative, a fellow member of the bloodline of the patriarch Abraham. Perhaps he sees her as a cousin of sorts, even though there are a thousand reasons why he shouldn’t interact with her.

He is fully cognizant of her status as “other.” He’s been patently clear thus far: the mission is to the Jews. That will change, but until now, it’s been about reclaiming and reframing the relationship between Creator God and the Chosen people.

She approaches him, begging for help. She calls him Lord, Son of David. How would she know? Jesus has mentioned nearby places like Tyre and Sidon in Scripture, but he isn’t known to have visited those Canaanite cities before. She is desperate. Her daughter needs healing.

But she’s “other.” Not part of the mission. So he ignores her. But she keeps at him. It’s a risk for her too, crossing into this DMZ of Jew versus Canaanite. But her daughter...

Maybe when you know you’re really part of the same family, you’re willing to risk anything if there’s something you need. Maybe when you’re desperate, you’ll grasp at the thinnest of straws, the most dilute of bloodlines.

The disciples, still disturbed by what happened earlier in the Galilee with the Pharisees, where they were called out for not following the law precisely enough, want Jesus to wave her off. She’s still at it, shouting for help over and over. And he turns and says, in essence, “You’re not my problem.”

“You’re not my problem, even if your foremothers were my foremothers.”

“You’re not my problem – I’ve got my hands full with the Jews and they’re my mission.”

“You’re not my problem – it’s those awful Pharisees.”

And in a moment that seems utterly and completely alien from someone who talked about leaving 99 other sheep behind to go rescue one, he says “It’s not fair to take the children’s food – what I am to bring to the Jews - and throw it to the dogs – non-Jews like you.”

She, being a relative, albeit a distant one, pushes back, hard. Relatives are more likely to do that than strangers, right?

“Even dogs get the crumbs under the table.”

“I.AM.YOUR. PROBLEM.”

He steps back, shocked by her response. Shocked, perhaps, by what had come out of his own mouth.

And he sees her. Not as “other” but as someone he loves: he acknowledges her faith in him and heals her daughter instantly. He sees her.

There is a tendency to try to avoid that which makes us uncomfortable, to take on other people’s problems. Our lives are complicated and busy, and we are barely keeping our heads afloat. We’ve got our own issues: job troubles, health concerns, children worries, marital stress. Problems enough, right? That person begging on the street corner? Not our problem. The trans person being teased mercilessly by some teenage bullies? Not our problem. The two young Black men on the side of the road, their hands cuffed behind their backs, as the police rifle through their vehicle? Not our problem. The Latina headed for her second or third job of the day, looking exhausted, looking over her shoulder for an ICE agent? Not our problem.

Until they turn their eyes toward us, and we see the unspoken challenge that is not verbalized. I AM. YOUR. PROBLEM. That which each of us has tolerated because we thought someone else’s pain was not our problem is our indictment. We are convicted, most especially when someone else suffers, and we in some way have benefited.

Because those human beings, those children of God, are our problem, as the Canaanite woman and her daughter were to Jesus. A problem that may have resulted from our own willingness to categorize another beloved child of God as “problem.”

We cannot live in the space of “not my problem” if we want to claim that we are followers of Jesus Christ. Even Jesus Christ, when confronted by someone who was not part of his original mission plan, responded by spiraling out from the tightness of that original mission plan into something more expansive, more inclusive, more driven by the love in his heart than the constricting bands of the old way.

It’s interesting, isn’t it, that the only time that Jesus seems to have been bested in a theological wrestling match was by this woman. This Canaanite woman. Unaccompanied, in the DMZ. Crying out, nay demanding, help for her daughter. Her problem became his problem and his heart full of love enveloped her pain and healed. He saw her and in that moment she was no longer “other.” She was beloved.

Our responsibility in these painful times is to make others’ problems our problems. Not because we have any particular wisdom or skill, but just because we see each other and we love. Because Jesus sees us and loves us and in his eyes we are not problems, we are the objects of his love.

In this moment, in our DMZ of isolation, of illness, of racism, of poverty, of fear. look around. Look at each other in this space of nowhere-ness. We are all each others’ problems now, or,

if we look through the lens of Christ's love, we are all each others' brothers and sisters and siblings in love, called to envelop each other in loving embrace.

Troubles and brokenness maybe be our present trials, in our DMZ. Some of those troubles and brokenness existed long before we walked into this space of "nowhere-ness." But we are not without ways to heal ourselves and each other and this world. And so we name what is broken, who is hurting, how change must happen. We see each other and we begin the slow, hard work of healing, using the best gift that Jesus Christ has given us. Love. As Jesus loved. Just love.

Amen.