

WHAT ABOUT THEM?
(Matthew 15:21-28)

Whenever I watch a British movie or something from the BBC on TV, I have to turn the volume way up. Otherwise I only understand about half of what they're saying. Maybe I'm lazy or not paying attention, but I think it's the accent.

Accents are funny things. Someone with a really good ear can tell where you're from even if you're sure you don't have an accent. I had a teacher in seminary who picked up something that told him I was from Texas even though I hadn't lived there for more than 25 years and never thought I had an accent.

Ivy Wilson in John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* says this about accents: "Ever'body says words different. Arkansas folks says 'em different, and Oklahoma folks says 'em different. And we seen a lady from Massachusetts, an' she said 'em differentest of all."

The Boston accent is the butt of many a joke and a lot of people who have it want to lose it. Marjorie Feinstein-Whittaker's "Boston Accent Modification" program attracts people who think they sound dumb when they say "pahk the cah in Hahvad yahd." One woman in Whittaker's program was convinced that her accent holds her back on job interviews even though she has a degree from Northeastern.

Accents can be linguistic cultural barriers, and a really strong one might be a hindrance. They certainly are in places like Britain, which is a land separated by accents.

There seems to have been some kind of cultural barrier between Jesus and the Canaanite woman he meets in today's lesson. She apparently came looking for Jesus, and when she finds him she starts shouting. Maybe she thought if she talked louder, he would understand what she was saying.

But Jesus ignored her. Maybe he didn't understand her Canaanite accent. Maybe he shared the usual Jewish hostility toward Gentiles. Maybe he was a typical misogynistic Jewish male. Or maybe Jesus was having a really bad day and it was all just too much. Whatever the reason, turning up the volume doesn't do this woman any good and only annoys Jesus' disciples.

I read this story and it's not the Canaanite woman who annoys me; it's Jesus and his buddies – telling her to shut up and go away and calling her and her sick daughter dogs. That's about as insulting as it gets. The Canaanite woman deserves a lot of credit. It took courage to do what she did. And it took a broader worldview than the one Jesus shows.

I don't want to let Jesus off the hook here or make excuses for him or sugarcoat his harsh rhetoric. I don't think he was being playful or teasing when he called the mother and daughter dogs. I don't think he was testing her faith to see if she was worthy of his help. Jesus' humanity is on display in today's lesson. Like all of us, he had some learning and some growing to do. And some of that learning and growing wasn't pretty.

On the other hand and to be fair, most of the time Jesus went out of his way to break down barriers. He hung out with social misfits and didn't apologize when the good folks made nasty remarks. His most famous parable – the one about the Good Samaritan – is about breaking down barriers. By the end of the gospel of Matthew, Jesus is telling his followers to go and make disciples of all nations, which is 180 degrees from where he is with the Canaanite woman. Somewhere along the way his thinking changed. And maybe this pushy Canaanite woman with her great faith helped with the change.

When we look beyond Jesus, it's clear that breaking down barriers was the great challenge in the first years of church. Early Christians weren't arguing esoteric points of doctrine. Their concern was completely practical: Can Jews and Gentiles be one community? That was the question. If leaders like Peter and James had had their way, the answer to that question would have been No and there wouldn't be a church today, at least not one we would recognize and be part of.

At its best, Christianity is probably the most inclusive faith of all. At its best, Christianity takes seriously the apostle Paul's noble view that distinctions between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female have been abolished because all are one in Christ. At its best, there aren't supposed to be any barriers – social, cultural, economic, ethnic, or anything else. Sadly, we are not always at our best, and barriers still stand between us.

Someone has said that Christians are called to be "border crossers," which is a risky occupation.

What would we give for a few leaders with the courage to actually lead for a change and take the risk of crossing borders? Instead we see the shameful spectacle in Washington. No one sees the bigger picture. Partisan rants and pandering drown out civil dialogue. Anyone with a different opinion isn't seen as an opponent to be debated but an enemy to be destroyed. Washington has become the modern Babel where no one listens to or understands anyone else – and worst of all, doesn't want to listen or understand.

In the 1980s sociologist Robert Bellah and a group of colleagues did a study of individualism and commitment in American life and published their findings in a book titled *Habits of the Heart*. Ronald Reagan had just been elected on the slogan that it was "morning in America." But the Bellah group saw it differently. They saw a country wracked by problems of economic injustice and moral cynicism, where individualism was running riot and the ideal of community was fading fast.

We talk about the "American dream," but there are really two dreams according to Bellah. In the dominant dream, individuals are successful and stand apart from others. The rugged individual is the ideal. In the other dream, individuals live in a society that is "really worth living in." That's the Martin Luther King vision of the beloved community.

If anything, the last quarter of a century has only seen things get worse. Today the American dream is to make enough money to be able to move into a gated so-called "community," and I put "community" in quotes because it's the most superficial kind of community imaginable. An enclave where you're

surrounded by others just like you who have made it and where you never have to rub shoulders with the unwashed masses, except maybe for the undocumented nanny or yard worker or valet at the country club – that is not a community in any meaningful sense of the word.

T. S. Eliot in his play *The Rock* asked, “What life have you if you have not life together?” And he answered, “There is no life that is not in community. And no community not lived in praise to God.” Community is about putting people in touch with each other and with God, putting people in a place where they can find something they can’t find in their isolated solitary lives. Holiness is born out of community, not out of isolated individualism. Henri Nouwen defined community as “that place where the person you least want to live with always lives.”

It’s only in community that we’re challenged and enabled to be better people that we would have been if left to our own devices. That’s the challenge for the church – to be and model that kind of community so, in the words of the apostle Paul, “the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known” (Eph. 3:10).

Communities like that are increasingly rare and increasingly precious and increasingly necessary. Being and modeling a community of inclusiveness and caring is our best hope for transforming the world. It’s our only hope.