

A Sermon for the 12th Sunday after Pentecost/Proper 15A
St. Mary's Episcopal Church
Goochland, Virginia
August 20, 2023

Like it or not, I guess, when we were born into this world, we inherited 'lines in the sand' that had already been drawn. Those lines in the sand were already there as soon as we began to learn how to walk on our own two feet and began to learn how to speak for ourselves. In fact, some of those 'lines in the sand' influence where we think our feet can take us and what words we can say or not. As we grow up, we find out about those lines sometimes when we accidentally cross one of them. And sometimes we're told about those lines pretty explicitly. I remember hearing: "you'll be known by the company you keep," or "if you lie down with dogs you are going to get fleas."

I was hanging out with some boys in my neighborhood when I was a kid who were a little rougher than my mother was comfortable with, and she told me so. I thought she just didn't understand them. But one summer, some of these boys got in trouble with the police for breaking into a neighbor's house when they were away on vacation and vandalizing the house. I didn't have anything to do with it but that didn't stop a Chesterfield County police officer from coming by our house and questioning me. To my mother's credit, I don't remember her saying, "I told you so." I guess she didn't have to.

But then there are lines drawn in the sand that don't seem to have anything to do with getting fleas. I wish it was as simple as that. One afternoon, at least twenty years ago, I was driving downtown to visit a parishioner who lived in the Mosby Court. She'd been at my parish for two or three years and she was living proof that God's mission for the church is about opening doors not closing them. I was stopped at a light near the housing complex where my parishioner lived, and a young man came up to my car and motioned for me to roll down my window. I did and he said, "Hey, what's going on?" and I said, "I'm heading to see a parishioner." He said, "Yeah, that's good. Look," he said, "you don't really want to be around here, OK?" I said, "What?" He said, "Yeah, you probably just want to go on now." And then he walked off. It wasn't a warning. And it wasn't a concern for me. It was just a simple statement.

The truth is that a line in the sand had gotten crossed that neither I nor that young man had put there. But that didn't matter. There was no right or wrong about it. It just was. It was just one more example of Martin Luther's famous words that our lives are cut out of crooked wood. I remember sitting there at the light feeling like everything was starting to swim around me, like I'd just caught "situational vertigo." Everything had gotten sort of weird and unsettling. But I think that's what it's like when we come upon those 'lines in the sand' and cross over into this borderline 'no-man's zone,' where people find it hard to be people with each other.

The Gospel reading this morning plunks us down in one of those places. Jesus, fresh from bickering and arguing with a group of Pharisees, leaders of his own people,

people on his side of the line, goes for a long walk with his friends. Maybe he needed to clear his head. Maybe he just wanted to walk it off. Maybe he wasn't paying attention, but he walked and walked until he went past all the familiar signs of home and crossed over the line in the sand between his own people, the Jews, and 'those other people,' in this case the Canaanites. The Canaanites were the people who were already living in the Promised Land when Moses led the children of Israel in to possess that land as their new home. The Canaanites were an old and ancient enemy, and they lived over there, not here. And they were the kind of people you told stories about – the way they lived, what they thought about things – but had never actually met. They were the kind of people you didn't need to concern yourself with much, at least not as real people. We are us and they are them. Line in the sand drawn. Case closed. End of story. It has been that way; it will stay that way. Nothing else to tell.

Most people, if they find themselves in one of those borderline places, observe the niceties with their eyes down, mouths closed, and just keep moving until you can get back to your side of the line where you can be yourself again. And that's what looks like is happening with Jesus and his followers. They are just passing through.

And then the most amazing, strange, confusing, disturbing, glorious thing happens. A Canaanite woman – the kind of person you hear about but never meet – decides not to keep her eyes down and her mouth closed, but raises her face and looks Jesus in the eye and opens her mouth. "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon."

Well. Her baby girl is in agony. She can be forgiven for breaking form, for stepping over the line. Your own heart tells you that.

But when lines get crossed, things start swimming around, 'situational vertigo' sets in and what you thought was up is down. What comes next for us is like a compass needle spinning unable to find true north. Our own hearts tell us that we could easily find words to say to her in response like how sorry we are or even to ask for her name so we could pray for her. But Jesus doesn't say a word to her. And even when the woman meets his silence with more words, pleading for her daughter, those words are met with harsh words from the disciples: be quiet, get away, you probably just want to go on now, they say.

Jesus finally speaks to say that he must be obedient to his call to feed the lost sheep of Israel. He must remain himself – feeding the children and not throwing what little there is to the dogs.

Which are words that send the compass spinning even more wildly. What in the world are we to make of his words? Is he testing her? Is he testing himself and his own call as Messiah?

And what comes next is the assurance that however obvious and clear a line in the sand seems, however certain it appears that the story about us and them has been told to

the end with no more words to come; we see that the story that we were sure was finished, isn't. The Canaanite woman says to Jesus that the mercy with which he is feeding the lost sheep of Israel is enough to feed her too. Even just word that there's a man like him in the world doing what he's doing, even just word of that, gives her enough faith to hope he might care about her life too.

And the spinning compass lands square and solid on true north with Jesus words, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly. Mercy, and not lines in the sand, are the final word.

We may not on any given day be called to be as brave as that Canaanite woman. Especially those times when it seems like God is silent to us too. We know that there are lines in the sand drawn that were laid down long before we came onto the scene. Sometimes those lines seem to be an immovable ending. But we follow in the footsteps of Jesus, free to let our feet follow where he leads, and where those 'lines in the sand' become the place where the newest words of the story that God is telling that heals the world, begin. Amen.