

A sermon preached at Maple Street Church, United Church of Christ  
Danvers, MA  
Date: July 9, 2017  
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Matthew 15:10-28 (Psalm 133)

*Enter Into the Borderlands with Hope*

The borderlands—the borderlands are spaces of transition and change, promise and peril. They are spaces and times we enter into willingly and, sometimes, unwillingly. Chicana author Gloria Anzaldúa says, “Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. [She says] a borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition.”<sup>1</sup> In a poem she writes:

Wind tugging at my sleeve

Feet sinking into the sand

*I stand at the edge where earth touches the ocean*

*Where the two overlap*

*A gentle coming together*

*At other times and places a violent clash.*<sup>2</sup>

Now, Jesus of Nazareth, our Christ Jesus, the head of our church, our inspiration and our friend, he knew the borderlands. He existed in the borderlands between

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<sup>1</sup> Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books; 2nd edition, May 15, 1999, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 23.

*divine* being and *human* being. He walked the earth. He felt our joy and our sorrow. He knew physical pain and pleasure. He had wisdom and he had fears. He was also of God and in God. The incarnation of God was present to us when he walked the earth and as he lives in our hearts today.

Sometimes what we do for our families, friends, in our jobs and even for our church can take us—ready or not ready—into these borderlands. We find in our scriptures that Jesus was sometimes confronted with entry into the borderlands when he was not ready. In Gethsemane, for instance, where Jesus prayed to God to remove the cup from him, that was a borderland space and time he reluctantly entered into. And as we learned today from our gospel reading he also passed through the borders between Jewish and Gentile territories on his way to Sidon and Tyre; into the borderlands between the “clean” and the “unclean.” In these borderlands his well-laid out plans did not always succeed, but they often bore much fruit.

Matthew tells us the story of Jesus calling the crowd to him. Jesus called people then as he calls us today to think anew about our neighbors and our lives. Jesus does not sit back waiting for people to come to him, but seeks us out—calls us—to engage in life and learning and to enter into the borderlands. Jesus taught his disciples, this Jewish crowd familiar with their faith’s purity laws, that the most important aspect of life is what comes out of our mouths, or to put it a bit differently, what comes from the breath of our souls that we share with our

neighbors. Our voices, our language, our breath is the creative force that God has given us to make the world a vital place.

Jesus taught his disciples to throw off the blinders that kept their minds and hearts cloistered. He told them to engage in this diverse and complex world which is filled with layers of meaning. He is asking us not to follow those urges that defile or trample upon the world of promise and opportunity that God created. Do not follow those who are blind and want to make the world a simple place where all who hope to share in God's love must follow the same path. God calls upon Jews and Muslims and Christians to use the complexity and diversity of the world to bless and sustain the creation. Those who never enter into the borderlands, who never enter into the spaces and times where in which we are able to share our diverse lives, may lack the sight and the foresight to see that what really sustains the world is not rigid simplicity, but is the rich diversity of thought and opinion that is generously and respectfully shared with those living on the other side of the borders of our lives. *In the biological world, the more simple and alike the life is in an ecosystem, the more likely it will to die.*

Speaking of living on the other side of the border, how about this Canaanite woman who challenges Jesus himself to step into the borderlands? This Canaanite woman who shares a common physical heritage with Jesus, but not his faith, who probably worships multiple gods, has the temerity *and the faith* to call Jesus out. She challenges his isolationist and insular thinking that he was only called to minister to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Notice carefully, how she approaches Jesus. The author of Matthew tells us that she calls Jesus “Lord, Son of David,” a title of honor and respect. Then she kneels before Jesus saying, “Lord, help me. Lord, have mercy on me.” This woman who not only holds a lower status than Jesus and the men of that day; this woman who acknowledges that her people are thought of as “dogs,”—she has the courage and faith to step into a place of uncertainty and even of threat in order to seek healing for her daughter. She willingly enters into the borderland between Gentile and Jew with all the cultural danger of that time, and she enters with faith, hope and a show of honor and respect for this Jewish prophet and teacher who is passing through her community. She risks the scorn not only of Jesus and his disciples, but also from her own people for stepping out of the role she has been cast into, and she enters into the borderland with faith and hope and need. Why? She loves her daughter enough to reach out. She believes that a stranger might just in some way be a healing presence in the life of her family.

After the Canaanite woman has shouted at Jesus, calling him out so he will see and acknowledge her, what does Jesus do? Matthew tells us “he does not answer her at all.” He ignores her. And the disciples urge Jesus to send her away. My goodness they think she is beginning to make a spectacle of herself, and worse, she is drawing attention to them—to these strangers in the borderlands. She is treading on dangerous territory. Now, at first, Jesus seems to go along with his disciples’ pleas. But then she continues to engage in dialogue with Jesus, and he with her. She stakes her claim to justice and seeks relief and healing. Her

courage and her faith are acknowledged by Jesus. Jesus leaps across the border of the cultural and religious divide and publicly recognizes her faith granting her wish for the healing of her daughter. You see, I think it is not only the daughter who experiences the healing ways of God in this story. Jesus and the woman meet in the borderland and both were transformed.

Entering into the borderlands where we bring our whole selves—with all of our talents, hopes, dreams, faults, and brokenness—is fraught with challenge and uncertainty. But if we approach our neighbor with respect and honor and, yes, love and faith, even though our differences may be great, the work of the Holy Spirit can guide our actions and our breath—the words coming from our hearts and minds. Our faith requires of us from time to time that we leave our secure homes and move into the borderlands to work with people across generations, across theologies, and across cultures to discover those things that God would have us learn and do for the world, for ourselves, and for God.

These moments when we unwillingly or willingly enter into the borderlands can be momentous, but they can also be the stuff of everyday living. It's up to us to keep ourselves awake to the new possibilities and different options. I've driven several times across this great and diverse land we call the United States. I once stayed a night in Cincinnati, Ohio, to see their new ballpark (of course!), and relax at the baseball game before continuing on early the next morning. To my surprise, my hotel was just up the block from the banks of the Ohio River. Now, right next to the Great American Ballpark on the banks of the river also sits the

new Freedom Center, the “museum of conscience” that celebrates the Underground Railroad. This is where people, black and white, risked their lives, homes, and families for this concept we call freedom. Slaves, with the help of abolitionist farmers, merchants, and ministers, would cross the dangerous Ohio on one leg of their dangerous journey to freedom. This magnificent museum and interpretive center on the banks of the river is a magnet for people of all persuasions and all races; it is a place where they can witness, through interactive technology, lectures, and exhibits, a truly remarkable celebration of people risking their lives, of people entering into the borderlands where their lives, both black and white were forever transformed.

The Holy Spirit moved me to extend my stay so that I could take in more of this profound and inspiring place. In this borderland on the river between Kentucky and Ohio, we witnessed people coming together in their everyday lives to learn, talk, pray, and hope. On this *natural* boundary, we witnessed people experiencing the *emotional residue of an unnatural boundary* of fear and hatred between peoples—a boundary that sadly still continues to exist today in less overt behaviors. But by letting go of my plans and stepping into those borderlands of knowledge and discovery, my faith and hope were strengthened.

But you know folks we do not have to travel to the banks of the Ohio River, or to the Holy Lands, to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, or of the Canaanite woman—and to step into the borderlands. In this our church home, with friends and family and neighbors all around us, let us take the time we need to act in the ways of faith and to respect and honor each other. Let us not shrink from shining the

light of God that is within us so that others will also let their light shine. Let us walk together into the borderlands where conflict will surely exist but will not overwhelm us and where God can transform us into a vital place of healing, redemption, and promise. Amen.

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