

Sermon – Sunday August 20, 2023

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Canaanites were outsiders. Indeed, the Jews thought of the Canaanites as even worse than outsiders. They were military foes and idol worshippers. Israel often defined itself by comparing itself against the Canaanites; for example, the Israelites worshipped God and were God's chosen people, while the Canaanites were bad people that didn't like God. The Israelites also thought God didn't like the Canaanites either.

But the Canaanites weren't the only group the Jews believed God disliked. The Jews thought that only Jews – really only Jewish men – were entirely welcome in God's presence. For example, only Jewish men could come close to the altar to worship in the Temple. Jewish women were relegated to a court outside the central part of the Temple – in the same general area as the lepers went to be declared "clean."

Gentiles didn't even get that close to God. They had to stay in an outer courtyard where a gate prevented them from having the same access to worship as the Jews. The Gentiles weren't even worthy to come into the area of the lepers and women.

Jews had erected barriers to prevent outsiders from accessing God's love and grace. They believed they were the only people entitled to that grace.

Sometimes we also erect barriers. Ours aren't as visible as those barriers the Jews erected. Our worship space doesn't have multiple courtyards that allow tiered access to God – with the most "worthy" being allowed to come the closest.

Our barriers are less conspicuous and, most likely, created unconsciously. Let's consider where we might erect barriers that render others as "outsiders" who can't join us.

One barrier could be an expectation that everyone comes to God the same way we do. We have a rich liturgy steeped in tradition that is meaningful to us. We are accustomed to coming to God that way, and our way of worshipping God is acceptable to God. However, others may come to God better through clapping hands and shouting "Alleluia." Or, they may come to God silently in the prayer garden most of the hour. Eliminating this barrier means creating a space that allows them equal access to God while preserving access for us in this space.

Another barrier could be our expectation that people will come to experience God's love on their own. While God's love is always available to everyone, some people may not be able to recognize that love. They may lack experience in discerning the holy. Or, they may be too torn with grief, shame, or poverty to see anything else.

Eliminating this barrier requires that we open our eyes to see those who need to feel God's love. It requires that we show God's love to them. God loves them no matter their circumstances. We are called to help them as they journey from grief to hope or from shame to the confidence that they are worthy to stand before God because of Jesus. God calls us to help meet their basic needs and to let them know that God's love is not

measured in worldly riches. Indeed, in many places in the Gospels, Jesus reaches out most often to those with the greatest need.

We enjoy each other's company in church. One of our great strengths is our tight-knit church family. However, having a tight-knit family can hinder others from having access to God's mercy in this place. Perhaps we've had the experience of trying to fit into a tight-knit group before. Maybe, we experienced the need to fit in when we became engaged and wanted to fit in with a new family. Or when we went off to college and needed to find new friends.

If a group is very tight-knit, it has a rhythm and common language that sometimes takes effort for others to discern and fit into. Group members that enjoy being with each other tend to talk only with each other about common interests. They are so excited to visit with each other that they overlook the newcomer among them. The newcomer remains an outsider and doesn't gain full access to God's grace in this place. Sure, God loves them just as much as us. But, if we fail to notice them, we have shut them out from experiencing that love here.

Sometimes we also expect people to be like us. Most of us are past the days of racial prejudice. We know that people of all colors have similar emotions and needs to our own. We've all experienced young adults who color their hair blue or red, and we seem to accept them as full members. Many of us also have gotten beyond expectations that all people will have the same sexual orientation.

However, our human nature still sometimes struggles to accept as insiders those who are different from us. For example, what about a homeless person who might smell bad? Could we exchange the peace with them and sit opposite them at coffee hour without making a face? If we cannot do these things, we have created a barrier to that person worshipping God with us and experiencing God's love in this space. Yet, all four of today's Scriptures unite around the theme that God is for all who seek to serve God. Our call is to show the love of God to *all people* and welcome them into the worship of God.

I admit I sometimes construct barriers between myself and other people. These barriers may prevent these people from seeing God's love in me or worshipping God with me in this space.

All of us have growing edges. All of us need to be aware of the barriers we unconsciously create and work to remove those barriers.

Every day, we are to grow more like Jesus. We are to grow in how we show God's love. And God's healing grace and love knows no boundaries.