

Community: Borderless and Boundless

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Genesis 45:1-15 and Matthew 15:21-28

One of the great COVID questions is “what shows have you been bingeing?” There is no judgment here – old Disney movies, “The Office” for the twentieth time, cornhole on ESPN, whatever.

Someone suggested, and we have started watching, a show that kind of flew under the radar, “Halt and Catch Fire.” The phrase itself comes from computer engineering, referring to a code instruction that causes the computer to cease meaningful operation. “Halt and Catch Fire” is not a great show by any means, but it is interesting, capturing the rise of personal computers and gaming and the internet in the 1980’s through the lives of several characters, a coding rebel, a narcissistic dealmaker, an engineering geek couple and an old school salesman.

No more details than that, except for this moment, a reference to a series of episodes whereby in writing a very complex gaming platform, the company discovers that game players, gamers, like to talk with each other online even when they are not playing the game. Who would have thought? What we now take for granted – texting, emailing, FB chats, Zoom calls, were once *not* a thing. Why would people want to connect with each other that way, when they could visit in person, or send a letter, or dial a telephone? Why indeed?

The fledgling company names this new program that will be part of the technology revolution we all now take for granted. They name it “Community.”

*Community.* It is who we are as a church, and who we are ever more fully called to be. It is what we miss greatly in COVID 2020, and what we seek to find, create, recalibrate in this anxious and uncertain season. It means many things, some of which we attain and some to which we aspire. It does not mean many other things, even though we fall into the trap of thinking so.

The sign in front of the church says “The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill: An Inclusive Community of Faith.” Those are more than words on a sign. They are more, even, than a brand or a tagline. They are a creed, a statement of faith. They are an affirmation, an aspiration, as well as an indictment and critique. They are a goal, a strategic plan, a vision, a continual reminder of who God is calling us to be.

Bottom line at the top, or up front, as they say: Jesus, the one we follow, is constantly expanding, broadening, re-imagining, re-engineering, re-conceptualizing, re-calibrating, our understandings and practices of community. By the stories he tells and the actions he takes, Jesus compels us to do the same, to live into, day by day, the promise of being an inclusive community of faith, and to make course corrections along the way when we fall short or miss the mark.

That radical inclusivity takes on many forms. In this moment our focus is on race and racism, and rightly so. It has recently focused on human sexuality and our LGBTQ siblings and friends, and rightly so. It is all that and more than that.

We experience two stories that suggest how radical and multidimensional the community of Jesus is, and can be.

The broad outlines of the Joseph story are familiar. Joseph has a dream. He is sold by his brothers. In Egypt, Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dreams and builds his power base. Famine in Israel continues, so the brothers head to Egypt to buy grain. Family drama follows, until the point, this point, when Joseph makes himself known to his brothers, the brothers who sold him all those years ago, the brothers who now come before him starving, literally.

It is a sweet moment of reconciliation, yet a complex one. The brothers demonstrate changes of heart and behavior over the years, repentance, remorse, lament, their former intense hatred now gone. Joseph shows a willingness to hold no grudge, to forgive if not forget. The broken family circle is complete again, wounds healed, even as scars remain. Human behavior is superseded by God's mercy, God's will for the preservation of life and relationships.

An Australian scholar writes "In our lives we cannot avoid being accountable for actions which hurt and give pain to others whether on a personal level or indeed on a global level. However, it is the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit which can overcome our sin, bring new life and possibilities from situations." (Unitingchurch.org)

Imagine yourself as Joseph. Or one of the brothers. What does exclusion look like, at a deeply poignant family level? What does ultimate inclusion look like, and at what cost? Where is God in all of this, and what are God's hopes and dreams for us? What happens when we are faced with moments like this, either as the practitioner of repentance and remorse or the recipient?

We pivot to the life of Jesus, to a story seemingly disconnected from Joseph and his brothers and yet, through the lens of radical inclusivity and the unexpected and ever-expanding circle of God's welcome, highly on point.

A Canaanite woman approaches Jesus, that is to say, a *woman* from a different religion and ethnicity. She knows who Jesus is and she asks him for help, not for herself, but for her daughter. Jesus does not respond to her, not even a verbal rebuke or rebuff. The disciples attempt to move her on, and Jesus amplifies his dismissal." I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." That is, because she is not local, or Jewish, she is none of my business.

Nevertheless, she persisted. She will not take no for an answer. She asks again, and again, Jesus is dismissive, likening her condition to the dogs who don't even get the scraps from the table. Again, she persists. Can't I even get the crumbs, if not the scraps? And then this extraordinary moment – Jesus is converted. He changes his mind. He commends her faith, and her daughter is healed.

There is so much to unpack here. Jesus, so often portrayed as meek and mild and gentle and kind, is anything but. This unnamed Canaanite woman, whose fierce love for her daughter breaks all of the stereotypes of passive female acceptance and replaces them with resilience

and resistance. What is faith here, her faith, the faith that Jesus commends? What does it mean that even Jesus' mind can be changed? What does it say to us about preconceived notions of who people are based on race or gender or ethnicity or background or who a person loves or where a person works? How have we practiced exclusion, or been the subjects of exclusion? How have we welcomed, or been welcomed? And what does it mean that God's mercy far surpasses our human understandings and practices, and even, it seems here, at least, even Jesus'?

Mitzi Smith writes that the Canaanite woman "expects something to happen at the intersection of her intercession and Jesus' mercy...Anyone with a pressing need knows how horrible it feels to have a dire or significant request for help or information met with dead silence." Smith writes: "In the end...Jesus responds by commending the woman for her faith...The woman's will to power manifested by her persistence identified as faith led to her daughter's healing."

Janet Hunt wonders if "Jesus was the one who needed to be taught. And the Canaanite woman was the vessel for this powerful teaching...about the place of 'outsiders' in our community of faith."

James Boyce likens Jesus' disciples as bouncers at a club, checking ID's, supported by Jesus himself. Boyce writes that "the resulting picture of Jesus and his response is so troubling that many interpreters have sought to soften or explain away the clear and direct language." And yet, writes Boyce: "...the stage is set for an astounding reversal...This woman is not to be put off, and against all the signs of apparent hopelessness, doggedly stands her ground, persistently seeking the Lord's help, even if it is only to be in those meager crumbs that might fall from the 'master's' table..."

How do we find ourselves in these two stories, and as multiple characters depending on the contours of our lives? Where does the church find itself? As Joseph, or the brothers? As the Canaanite woman, or Jesus? How are we converted, as conversion is so powerfully reflected in each story? How does the church convert and transform? Boyce writes of a "too-narrow tradition that would want to restrict God's mercies to a chosen few." How do we reexamine our hearts and appraise in new ways our understanding of the expansive reach of God's mercy?

Groucho Mark famously said that "I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member." That's where we start. We are members of the club, that is, we are welcomed, included, recipients of God's grace and mercy, not on our own merits, not because of our own worthiness, not because of who we are, but because of who God is.

And once we fully and humbly and gratefully understand that, we do well to extend that practice. Whether in the life of this nation or the history of the church, our exclusionary practices toward women, Black, indigenous, people of color, LGBTQ people have been not a reflection of their lack of worthiness, but our unworthiness in applying God's values. We have drawn the circle narrowly; God draws the circle wide. We have restricted the RSVP list; God's table always finds room for more seats. Who we find ourselves next to at the table – a sibling from whom we have been estranged, for example, or a woman with a dramatically different

biography – may not be who WE choose, but it is who God chooses, with the reminder that they may be thinking the very same thing about us.

German theologian Jürgen Moltmann writes that “...the church reaches as far as Christ reaches, and it is made up of the poor who are called blessed, now healed, freed prisoners, and justified sinners.” (*The Church in the Power of the Spirit*)

If that is true, and I believe it is, our front yard sign is one of promise and possibility – that having been, each of us, reached, having been included, unexpectedly, undeservedly, we now reach out with that same hospitality and mercy and love in a church whose circle is unbroken and ever-widening and to a world – our divided, distanced world – hungry for a new kind of beloved community. Amen.