

This Precious Child

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

15th Sunday after Pentecost - September 5, 2021

Texts: Deuteronomy 10:13-19; Psalm 146; Mark 7:24-30

Deuteronomy 10:13-19

The people of Israel were chosen and called by God not in order to lord it over other nations and people but to care for “the stranger,” the Other, as God had cared for them.

Moses instructed the people of Israel, “Keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being. Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the Lord your God, the earth with all that is in it, yet the Lord set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today. Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Psalm 146 (*adapted*)

Happy are those whose help is in God, their Maker,
God of heaven, earth and sea and all that is in them.

**It is God who keeps faith forever,
who works justice for the oppressed and feeds the hungry.**

It is God who sets the captives free,
who restores the sight of the blind, and raises up the lowly.

**It is God who protects the stranger,
who sustains the widow and the orphan.**

God our Maker will reign forever,
Our God through all generations.

**I will praise the Maker as long as I live;
I will sing to God all my life.**

GOSPEL READING Mark 7:24-30

Jesus’ ministry leads him away from his usual setting, beyond the border of Israel into Syria. There he encounters a woman who challenges his focus on his own people and perhaps opens his mind to the needs of a wider world.

From the Sea of Galilee, Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre on the Mediterranean coast, in Syria. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

There's so much we don't know about this story. Why did Jesus cross the border into a foreign land, all the way to the Syrian city of Tyre on the Mediterranean? Apparently not to heal people; he was trying to avoid them. And why did he insult the woman so shockingly?

The woman is even more mysterious. What was her name? Was she rich? Was she poor? Was she a widow, or a wealthy man's daughter? We don't know. We do know: she was Gentile, not Jewish. She was Syrophenician, not Israelite. And she loved her daughter a lot, enough to seek out a stranger for help. Enough to defy his cruel dismissal of her and demand his help. She got it.

Little as we know, I believe this encounter changed the course of Jesus' life. He had been raised to believe his people, the Jews, were uniquely loved and chosen by God, "out of all the peoples." Hadn't God sent him to help them? God knows, they were hurting just then. The standoff with the Syrophenician (or Syrian) woman teaches him to see her as God's child, too. Capable of great love and great faith. Needing his healing as much as any Israelite. He learned from her.

I'm going to share a story about another Syrian parent and child, written by an Afghan man, Khaled Hosseini. It's called *Sea Prayer*.¹ Marwan is a boy's name. Homs is a city in Syria that experienced many deaths and evacuations during the civil war; *Inshallah* means, "God willing."

My dear Marwan, in the long summers of childhood, when I was a boy the age you are now, your uncles and I spread our mattress on the roof of your grandfather's farmhouse outside of Homs.

We woke in the mornings to the stirring of olive trees in the breeze, to the bleating of your grandmother's goat, the clanking of her cooking pots, the air cool and the sun a pale rim of persimmon to the east.

We took you there when you were a toddler. I have a sharply etched memory of your mother from that trip, showing you a herd of cows grazing in a field blown through with wildflowers.

I wish you hadn't been so young. You wouldn't have forgotten the farmhouse, the soot of its stone walls, the creek where your uncles and I built a thousand boyhood dams.

I wish you remembered Homs as I do, Marwan. In its bustling Old City, a mosque for us Muslims, a church for our Christian neighbors, and a grand souk [market] for us all to haggle over gold pendants and produce and bridal dresses.

I wish you remembered the crowded lanes smelling of fried kibbeh, and the evening walks we took with your mother around Clock Tower Square.

But that life, that time, seems like a dream now, even to me, like some long-dissolved rumor.

¹ Khaled Hosseini, *Sea Prayer*, 2018. Illustrated by Dan Williams

First came the protests. Then the siege. The skies spitting bombs. Starvation. Burials.

These are the things you know. You know a bomb crater can be made into a swimming hole. You have learned that dark blood is better news than bright.

You have learned that mothers and sisters and classmates can be found in narrow gaps between concrete, bricks, and exposed beams, little patches of sunlit skin shining in the dark.

Your mother is here tonight, Marwan, with us, on this cold and moonlit beach, among the crying babies and the women worrying in tongues we don't speak. Afghans and Somalis and Iraqis and Eritrians and Syrians. All of us impatient for sunrise, all of us in dread of it. All of us in search of home.

I have heard it said we are the uninvited. The unwelcome. We should take our misfortune elsewhere.

But I hear your mother's voice, over the tide, and she whispers in my ear, 'Oh, but if they saw, my darling, even half of what you have. If only they saw, they would say kinder things, surely.'

I look at your profile in the glow of this three-quarter moon, my boy, your eyelashes like calligraphy, closed in guileless sleep. I said to you, 'Hold my hand. Nothing bad will happen.'

These are only words. A father's tricks. It slays your father, your faith in him. Because all I can think tonight is how deep the sea, and how vast, how indifferent. How powerless I am to protect you from it. All I can do is pray.

Pray God steers the vessel true, when the shores slip out of eyeshot and we are a flyspeck in the heaving waters, pitching and tilting, easily swallowed.

Because you, you are precious cargo, Marwan, the most precious there ever was. I pray the sea knows this, *Inshallah*. How I pray the sea knows this.

This book was inspired by the story of Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian refugee who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea trying to reach safety in Europe in 2015. That year, 4,176 others died or went missing attempting that same journey.

But this story touches me because it's not about the thousands. It's about the one.

This is the truth I know from this story and the story of a Syrian woman who confronted Jesus and demanded healing for her one precious, demon-ridden, child: God puts no nation, no faith,

no social status first. When it comes to loving people, God never counts higher than one: *This* precious child. *Your* beloved daughter, so deathly ill. *Your* cherished son, in such deep trouble.

You. If you were the only one on earth who needed help, God's heart would still ache with love for you. God loves each one of you as if you were the only one. That's how it is. Not because you're American or Presbyterian or a good worker or a nice person. Just because you are.

Until we get that, we really don't know what love is. Sometimes I think God set up this whole parent/child thing to teach us what it is to love someone more than life itself. And to teach us to love not just in the aggregate: not just, "so many thousand refugees, so many hundreds losing homes to fire or flood, so many dozens dead." But to love as God does, one by one by one.

You can't love a statistic. But you can love a person.

Refugees will soon be entering our country, our state, from our war in Afghanistan, as refugees have fled from other wars. Some will come here, to Rochester. We, who are so very loved, one by one by God - how will we love them in return?

Prayers:

~Righteous God, this Labor Day weekend we pray for all who labor, and for all who have no work, and will lose their benefits tomorrow. We pray for the invisible laboring children: The boy in Congo who mined the diamond in my ring at gunpoint; the child doing back-breaking labor in a California field, picking produce for my kitchen table; the girl in the sweatshop sewing my t-shirts. Open my eyes to understand what my choices mean in this globalized world, to understand my connection to millions of unseen children who will never be kids. Open my heart, as Jesus' heart was opened; teach me to love one by one by one. We pray also for children and teachers and assistants returning to school; may they observe precautions and stay safe and well.

~We pray for all those suffering from any cause: fire, war, weather, sickness; they are too many to mention, distant and unclear to us in their vast numbers, but to you, each one separate, distinct, uniquely loved and cherished. Teach us to love as you do. And thank you for giving us people so near and dear to us to love and care for: daughters and sons, parents and cousins and friends. May all who suffer and grieve find comfort in your presence. Amen