

Matthew 15:21-28

LOVE FOR ALL

Whether it's a part of the human nature we are born with, or it comes from how we are brought up and what we learn from listening to and observing others, making evaluations, assessments, calculations, of people is something we all do very regularly and without really thinking about it, isn't it? Or, we could be a bit more honest and open about it and call it, 'judging'. With those people we don't know, when we first see or hear them we are making an assessment based on how they look, how they sound, what they're wearing, what they are doing and saying, and from that determining what kind of a relationship we might have with them; are they someone we can trust and get to know more, or someone to whom we will try and be polite and then move on. With people we know better, these same assessments are made based on previous experiences with that person, what we've heard from others about them, and what we have seen them doing and heard them saying. And again, from that, we make an assessment about what our relationship with them will be like.

It is a very human thing to do this, and it enables us to protect ourselves and those who rely on us for protection. It's our way of working out who we want to have a closer relationship with, and who we want to have just an acquaintance with. But, as with many things, there is a line which can be easily crossed, so that our evaluations and assessments, our judgments, take another step to being about excluding people, devaluing them, disregarding their needs, making judgements which are neither true or fair but based on bias or prejudice from ourselves or others. And this, we know, leads to us cutting people off from our support and compassion, pushing them away from our friendship and inclusion, based on their race, their gender, their beliefs, their lifestyle. We can do this as individuals, or as groups. We can do this as Christians, which is surprising given both the Gospel account we have here today, and how Jesus treats many of these 'outsiders' at other times in the Gospels.

There are a number of occasions when Jesus treated people in ways which challenged the judgements and rules, the 'political correctness', of His time. He had this annoying habit of busting down

all the ways that people had come up with to put everyone in boxes of who is in and who is out. On many of these occasions, like the one we have here today, there is no doubt that Jesus' encounters with people who were considered to be on the 'outside' were not by chance, but clearly set up by Him. In this account we have today from Matthew 15, the story begins by telling us Jesus went to the territory near the cities of Tyre and Sidon. This was an area on the edge, where most likely the people you came across would be Gentiles, *Goyim*, unbelievers. Added to that the person Jesus came across was a woman, so she was unclean to Him as a Jewish man back then in two ways.

This lady comes to Jesus, and she begs Him to heal her daughter who is full of demons. Jesus doesn't react straight away, even though His disciples don't have much patience with this lady, and then when He does reply, He first of all seems to brush her off by telling her He has come for the people of Israel, and then seemingly calls her and her people 'dogs'! What do we make of that! A lot has been written and said about this, but, for me, I like to think Jesus is both testing her faith and also setting the disciples up for a shock with what happens next.

In response to her repeated requests, Jesus then praises this lady for her faith, and pronounces her daughter healed. In just those simple words, Jesus has smashed down the barriers which others had put up around who could receive God's love and grace, and who was unworthy to do so. Just before this, when Jesus rescued Peter when he was sinking in the water, He said to the Peter, 'You certainly don't have much faith.' *Matthew 14:31b* How would the disciples have felt now, hearing this unclean person being praised for her faith? Many times we see people who God's people at that time considered to be outsiders, beyond God's love, being praised by Jesus for their faith and receiving God's blessings through it. Jesus broke down the barriers, again and again.

And we can be thankful for that, because I'm not born Jewish, and most you aren't either, but through Jesus and many other teachings in the Bible God shows us that His love is for everyone.

We know that, but do we always practice that, even as Christians who have such concrete examples of it in the Bible? A few months ago when I attended the funeral of my uncle, another uncle and aunty of mine were telling me that their daughter and her wife had asked to have their child baptised in a Lutheran church here in Australia, but were refused because the child's parents were in a same-sex marriage.

Thankfully another Lutheran church did agree to do the baptism. That story makes me both mad and sad. How can we not learn from God's relationship with us that our place, our role, as God's people is not to judge, not to exclude, not to decide who is in or out of God's love, but to show and share the love that we, all as unworthy outsiders, receive? When we exclude people in these ways, acting as they perhaps expected us to, we just remind them and others that God is not really for them, that they need to be a certain kind of person, live a certain kind of life, in order to come into our Christian inner circle.

It's hard not to do it, isn't it? I know I have made judgement calls about people and their beliefs and lifestyles, their attitudes, and questioned where that puts them in relation to God. I know I still find that all too easy to do today, it's something I continually need to confess and ask for God's help with. Let's be honest, it's easy to have strongly held, black and white, views until they involve our lives and the people we love. It is not our place to judge in this way, to exclude, to assess people's values. As those who know God's love, our call is show and share God's love and grace with everyone in the way He calls us to do, and Jesus shows us to do. Jesus breaks down the barriers, most dramatically on the cross where He died for the sins of everyone, and our sins are no less than the people we choose to sometimes exclude or look down on. Jesus showed us, absolutely, that God's love is for all.

And that is a comfort for us. We know that, we experience it in our lives. Just like Jesus responded to the pleas of the woman in our story here, He also responds to our simple call of faith, 'Lord, help me'. Our prayers are answered, sometimes by taking the trouble away, and at others by giving us what we need to get through when we thought there was no way we could do so. And we know that whatever we do, including whatever judgements we make about others, we receive God's full and complete forgiveness for whatever we have done. It is not our place to judge, but alongside everyone else to receive God's love and forgiveness.

And that God's love is for all is also a challenge for us. It is both right and needed that we do make assessments about others when it comes to our close relationships with people. These are forms of conditional love, including close friendships; we don't relate to all people in the same way, and that's ok. But when we are talking about God's love, and how we share that with others, it's different. That's when it is good to ask ourselves individually, as a congregation, as the Church as a whole, are we as open as Jesus

to breaking down the barriers? What are the barriers today we have which need to be broken down? That is about welcoming people into our community, which we do pretty well but like everything we can always do better. How about opening ourselves up to the College community, or are we happy to do that as long as it doesn't put us out, or affect what we normally do? And then even about helping people, again both as a group and as individuals? Do we see what we have as being rightfully ours, having earned it we should solely enjoy it, or that God has given us what we have to fulfill our needs and for our enjoyment, and also so we can be his hands of love and compassion to the world, to everyone? Amongst ourselves here, how do we look at each other? Are we accepting, positive, supportive of everyone, or do we too often hold others up to our standards, our expectations, our preferences of how people should act and how things should be done, even of how they should practice their faith? God's love is for all, and knowing and living in that we are called to make our love be for all as well.

None of us are going to stop making assessments of people when we see, hear or think about them, it's a part of our nature, our culture, what we are taught. And in most cases, in terms of human relationships, that is a necessary thing. But when it comes to God's love, the love He showed in creating us all, the love Jesus showed in dying for us on the cross, this love is for all. God's love is for all, and in that sense of living out the love we know in our lives, we are called to also make our love be for all. Thank God that His love for us is unconditional and breaks down all barriers, and pray that this love is what we now both hold on to for our strength and comfort, and which we also now seek to show and share with all people. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- That God's love is for all is a comfort for us. In what situations, at what times particularly, do you take comfort and strength in knowing that God loves you, who and as you are, and nothing will change that?
- That God's love is for all is a challenge for us. What preconceived ideas or generalisations do you have about particular groups of people, attitudes, lifestyles, which you find it hard to let go of? How do your views prevent you from fully sharing God's love with these people? Hand these barriers over to God and ask Him to help you to break them down.
- Reflect on barriers you and others put up which try to keep others out of God's love: for you personally, in your congregation, in any other groups you are in. Hand these over to God, and ask for the courage, wisdom, and compassion of Jesus to break down these barriers so all can know God's love.

Prayer: thank God that He does love each one of us, despite the fact that we all unworthy. Pray that as we know His indiscriminate love, we may also indiscriminately share it.

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