Follow the Breadcrumbs [OR Prophetic Witness and Grace of Queer Inclusion]  
Isaiah 56:1-8 and Matthew 15:10-28  
Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on August 16, 2020

Jesus and a shouting Canaanite woman. What’s the picture in your head? Who is she? What color are her eyes, her hair, her skin? Is she rich or poor? We know that she’s a mother because her daughter is tormented. Jesus comes to town and she shows up shouting. I love this image in part because she has everything to gain and nothing to lose by shouting her broken heart at Jesus. His guys want Jesus to send her away for all the noise she’s making. Jesus doesn’t send her away though. He talks to her. He blows up the conversation by calling her a dog. Some theologians think he’s giving voice to what the disciples are thinking and trying to teach them a lesson because he is somehow in the know about what the Canaanite woman is going to do. After all, he IS the teaching Jesus in the gospel of Matthew. And here he seems to be teaching his disciples what not to do. Could he have known that she was in on the lesson with him? Was it because she called him “Son of David?” She knew the lingo, maybe she knew the rest of his genealogy too. It’s possible she had heard about the Canaanites in Jesus’ family tree listed in Matthew’s opening chapter to the gospel – Rahab the courageous prostitute, Tamar the righteous trickster, and Ruth the loyal daughter-in-law and great-grandmother to King David. Or perhaps Jesus had a physical feature that identified the Canaanite blood that also flowed in his veins through his family tree. Maybe she took one look at him and immediately knew they shared Canaanite blood.

We’ll never know whether she knew but it’s possible that that she did and it’s possible that Jesus knew about the non-Jew, Canaanite women in his genealogy. Jewish heredity follows the mother because mothers are obvious, pregnant links. It’s likely no mistake that it’s this point in Matthew’s Gospel at which Jesus’ ministry expands to include non-Jews. Up to now, he’s instructed his disciples to stay within certain Jewish boundaries. Now they’re in Tyre and Sidon getting

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1 Matthew 1:3-6 Jesus’ genealogy [Tamar: Genesis 38; Rahab: Book of Joshua, Chapter 2; Ruth: Book of Ruth]  
3 Pastor Barbara Berry Bailey, St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Denver, CO. Rocky Mountain Synod, ELCA, Metro East Preacher’s Text Study on August 11, 2020.
shouted at and possibly feeling a little defeated after all they’ve been through. First John the Baptist was killed, then they fed over 5,000 men, women, and children who were also on the move after John’s death, then they spent a terrifying night on a boat at sea in a storm before debarking in Gennesaret, until their trek to Tyre and Sidon where they’re shouted at in welcome. Let’s follow the breadcrumbs through that maze, shall we?

Jesus first follows the breadcrumbs when he said to the crowd and his disciples, “...it is not what goes into his mouth that defiles a person.” Just before he said this, the religious leaders who followed Jesus from Jerusalem accused the disciples of being unclean because they didn’t observe the ritual of handwashing before they ate. It makes me wonder if the religious leaders were spying from behind trees, watching the disciples feed the over 5,000 hungry people in our Bible story two weeks ago who probably didn’t wash their hands either. 4 Perhaps they were hoping to reduce the power of the feeding miracle on a religious technicality. (A little like reversing a flashy touchdown with an offsides penalty.) But the religious leaders’ stale plan couldn’t have worked. Leftover food collected after that meal for thousands filled twelve baskets with the broken pieces. Crumbs, sifting through the baskets, were left as evidence all over the field where the thousands ate. There’s no way the religious leaders could sweep those crumbs under the rug. That’s a significant breadcrumb trail to follow.

Teeny tiny breadcrumbs were probably still embedded in the disciples’ clothes while they were shouted at by the Canaanite woman who was empowered by her broken heart. When she knelt before Jesus, she said, “Lord, help me.” He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” (What is up with calling this woman a dog?!) Jesus’ comment vexes the faithful in every age. Jews didn’t historically keep or love dogs the way that their Greek and Roman counterparts did. 5 In antiquity, dogs were found in the households of all classes of people and a symbol of loyalty in art and literature. 6 Jesus’ dog accusation was flipped by the Canaanite woman who likely had a love of dogs

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4 Matthew 14:13-21
6 Ibid.
much like dog lovers in our 21st century households. Dogs in her town were fed under the table as beloved family members – crumbs falling over the table’s edge and lapped up by adored canine companions. Whatever this odd exchange between Jesus and the woman actually means, Jesus ends up rewarding the persistent loyalty of the woman by celebrating her faith and fulfilling her wish. His ministry expanded to include a non-Jew, a Canaanite sibling by blood, under the watchful gaze of his disciples. Before we get self-righteous about how Christianity is uniquely inclusive, let’s turn to our Isaiah reading.

Isaiah 56 begins what’s known as 3rd Isaiah because of the time period in which it’s thought to have been written. In our reading, the prophet welcomes two groups of people into the congregation – foreigners and eunuchs. These two groups of people were excluded based on the law in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible in the Old Testament. Foreigners and eunuchs had been legally kept out of the Jewish faith community. Foreigners is an understandable concept to us. Eunuchs maybe not so much. Eunuchs in the Bible are commonly understood to mean those who were intentionally castrated to become guards and protectors of women. However, this is a narrow definition that keeps preaching safely contained. In the ancient world, eunuchs were broadly understood as men who didn’t respond to women in a traditional, heterosexual way. 21st century language now describes eunuchs as queer and part of the spectrum of LGBTQIA+. The prophet in Isaiah welcomes the foreigner and the queer into the “reign of Shalom.” He writes:

“Thus says the Lord: Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say, “The LORD will surely separate me from his people”; and do not let the eunuch say, “I am just a dry tree...” I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.”

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7 Ibid., Smith.
9 Pastor Reagan Humber, House for All Sinners and Saints, Denver, CO. Rocky Mountain Synod, ELCA, Metro East Preacher’s Text Study on August 11, 2020.
10 LGBTQIA+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersexed, Asexual, Ally, and (+) other
11 Ibid., Jacobson.
12 Isaiah 56:1a, 3, and 5
Before any of us cast this passage off as an unusual wrinkle in the Old Testament, we could turn to the New Testament book of Acts when Philip, led by an angel, baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch who “had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home...reading the prophet Isaiah,” the 53rd chapter.13

Anyone’s mind blown yet? Can you feel grace tumbling down like breadcrumbs falling over the edge of a table? God’s grace cannot be contained by the religious leaders in Matthew’s Gospel who want to trap Jesus in an argument about ritual defilement. Instead, Jesus flips the conversation from ritual to right hearts. Much like the Canaanite woman turns the table on Jesus with her broken-hearted demand for the crumbs fed to the dogs and is praised by Jesus for her faith. These Bible readings are a breadcrumb trail that guide us into the ever-expanding ministries of the prophet Isaiah and Jesus. Ministries that include the diversity of human siblings in skin along with our Savior who slipped on skin to lead us in the right-hearted direction. Ministries fueled by an extravagant, perplexing grace that cannot be contained by religious leaders, bread baskets, or tables. For this, and for all the God is doing, we can say thanks be to God and amen.

Song after the Sermon:

Healer of Our Ever Ill (ELW 612)
(Refrain)Healer of our every ill,
Light of each tomorrow,
give us peace beyond our fear,
and hope beyond our sorrow.
1. You who know our fears and sadness,
grace us with your peace and gladness.
Spirit of all comfort, fill our hearts (Refrain)
2. In the pain and joy beholding
how your grace is still unfolding,
give us all your vision, God of love (Refrain)
3. Give us strength to love each other,
every sister, every brother.
Spirit of all kindness, be our guide (Refrain)
4. You who know each thought and feeling,
teach us all your way of healing.
Spirit of compassion, fill each heart. (Refrain)14

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13 Acts 8:26-40; in verse 32 we learn that the eunuch is studying Isaiah 53:7-8.
14 Sing along with music and lyrics here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hdltMxlvlN4