

# “Everyone?”

Matthew 15:21-28

August 20<sup>th</sup>, 2023, from the pulpit of  
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois  
Matt Matthews

Who do we want to welcome into the church of Jesus Christ?

This is a question that works at two levels, of course. It’s kind of a trick question. Who do we want to welcome into the church of Jesus Christ?

We are called to welcome everybody into the church of Jesus Christ, right?

Right.

Of course, we are.

But who do we *really* want to welcome? This is a question that gets at our prejudice, doesn’t it?

Do we really want to welcome children into our church? *Really?* We might not be able to hear the sermon. Children can be so squirmy and wiggly. In order to hear the sermon over their clatter, we might have to get up from our comfortable pews and come sit on the front row to hear the sermon. And everyone knows *real* Presbyterians never sit on the front row. So, do we really want to welcome children into the church of Jesus Christ?

The question can be a complicated one.

Who do we really want to welcome into the church of Jesus Christ?

If we get a bunch of thirty-somethings, they might want us to hire a rock and roll band for worship music. If we welcome Afghani refugees, we don’t speak their language and we don’t know their customs. That might be awkward. Some people might like praise songs, or hand-clapping, or silence. We can’t do all that at the same time.

Of course, we want to welcome people who think sort of like us, and worship sort of like us, and value the sorts of things we value.

*But what about the others?*

We know we are supposed to welcome everyone into the church of Jesus Christ, but do we really, really want to?

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Our first “yes” to this question is loud and clear. *YES!* Of course, we want to welcome everyone into the church of Jesus Christ. We want to welcome everybody gladly and whole-heartedly. But our second “yes” to this question is a smaller yes. *Yes*, we really want to welcome everyone. But, truth be told, we have some reservations.

Who do we want to welcome into the church of Jesus Christ?

In our reading from Matthew this morning, we have a powerful text that dances around this question. An outsider approaches Jesus and asks for mercy for her sick daughter. It’s what any good parent might do. *Please help my child.*

The problem with this person is that she is a “triple outsider on account of her gender, her ethnicity, and her cultural-religious affiliations,” which is to say she is a Canaanite woman.

This is how one commentator puts it:

“Jesus’ attitude and language in his encounter with the Canaanite woman is shocking. She is simply seeking deliverance for her demon-possessed daughter, and yet he calls her a dog—a name that his fellow Jews routinely gave to Gentile pagans. First, he is silent in the face of her cries, refusing even to acknowledge her (v. 23); then, he says that his mission is ‘only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’ (v. 24); finally, he tells her that the ‘food’ for the children should not be thrown to the ‘dogs’ (v. 26)—non-Israelites like her. (p. 356 *Feasting on the Word, Yr A, Vol 3*).

Some say that in this scene “Jesus is ‘caught with his compassion down,’ and he is forced to confront his own prejudice. In a reversal of the usual roles, the respected teacher [Jesus] learns from an outsider ‘the need to broaden his ministry of hospitality to those outside the house of Israel.’” (P. 358, *ibid*).

Other commentators say this is exactly how Jesus wanted the scene to unfold. He treats the woman roughly, just like most Jewish teachers would. He hopes she’ll confront him for his prejudice. She does. And he changes course as a teaching moment for his disciples.

And what a teaching moment this is.

It appears the Jesus won’t welcome this outsider. It appears Jesus doesn’t want to give this outsider the time of day. It appears Jesus will reject her. Instead, as the story unfolds, Jesus becomes impressed with the woman. He is impressed by her tenacity. He is impressed by her faith. He extends God’s mercy and healing to include even her and her child. Jesus makes even outsiders whole.

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*Who do we want to welcome into the church of Jesus Christ?*

In this text we meet a woman whom Jesus himself seems reluctant to welcome. But—reluctant or not—Jesus welcomes her, nevertheless, this ‘dog,’ this woman he calls a dog, this outsider.

Matthew’s gospel was written about a Jew, by a Jew, for Jews. Matthew’s audience, of all people, might expect Rabbi Jesus to exclude this outsider; they would understand and anticipate this. That Jesus ultimately included this woman probably came as a radical shock, a shock they might not have expected or welcomed. But she is included. She is welcomed. She is healed.

Jesus’s understanding of the kin-dom of God seems to include not only Jews, but gentiles. Not only men, but women. Not only free, but slave. Not only adults, but children. Not only the abled, but the differently-abled. Not only locals, but out-of-towners.

She has no name. We don’t hear from this woman again. But she wrestled with Jesus like Jacob wrestled with God. She came for a blessing. She would not be sent away empty handed. She would not be demeaned and forced to remain silent. She wanted in. She stood up to be counted. And she was. She was counted. She mattered. She was welcomed. Jesus made it clear that she was God’s child and had a place in God’s family.

*Who do we want to welcome into the church of Jesus Christ?*

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There are a lot of people in our community who believe they would not be welcomed here at First Pres Champaign. That’s a big church. That’s a white people church. That’s an African church. That church isn’t for me. For whatever reason, I wouldn’t be welcome.

There are a lot of people in our community who have no idea who we are, where we are, what we are. I was loading something into the front doors of our church one day. A passerby said, “Hello.” I said, “Hello.” He asked, “What is this place?” I asked, “What do you think this place is?” He took a long look and said, “A mall?” No, we aren’t a mall, or a museum, or a condominium. We are a church. But I’m not sure this man knows what a church is. (I invited him to come; I’ve not seen him since. Maybe one day. One day, I hope.)

There are a lot of people in our community who are un-churched, or de-churched, or ex-church, or anti-church. We live in a culture that is post-Christendom, post-denominational, post-modern, and we worship in a church that some say needs a postmortem.

If we are to welcome the world into our fellowship, how?

This is one reason I'm so glad to welcome Joe Lundy as our Associate Pastor for Discipleship. Singlehandedly, like the Christian Superman, Joe will do this for us. He's studied evangelism at Austin Seminary. He understands hospitality. Soon this church will be bursting at the seams because Joe is going to invite the whole world, and Joe will shake the hands of all the new friends he's going to make as they stream into our sanctuary for Sunday worship. Joe knows Jesus welcomes everybody. And Joe is going to tell our neighbors that Jesus wants to get to know them better. And these neighbors will rejoice in Joe's kind, heartfelt invitation. All we need to do is to sit back and watch.

Thank you, Joe!

Of course, that's not how it's going to go down.

But as Associate Pastor of Discipleship, Joe is, in fact, called to help us think about hospitality. Joe is called to help us get into the neighborhoods that surround us. Joe is called to help enliven our fellowship with one another and the world, and to energize our welcome. Joe is called to encourage us and to work alongside us as we sit down on the curb with the Canaanite women in our community.

Joe is being called to ask us questions:

- Why do we do it this way, and not that way?
- What excites us about ministry?
- How does God want to use our gifts in the ministry of this church?
- What does the future church look like?
- How might our hearts need to change?
- Tell me more about your history?
- Tell me more about your family?
- How is God's Spirit moving here, in this place, at this time?
- Do we really trust God?
- What does "church growth" look like?
- What's the difference between the "church" and the "institutional church"?
- Are we willing to try, to fail, and to fail better next time?
- What excites us about ministry? What frightens us?
- How is God calling us to get out of the boat and to walk on water?

God has gifted us with Joe. He's not a miracle worker—but he is. He is a miracle worker. God uses all of us to share the miracle of God's love. We *all* are miracle workers. (Call yourself that and see how it feels: *I am a miracle worker!*)

God has gifted us with Joe. God has gifted us with each other. And there's a place at the table *for everybody*.

Welcome, world.

And, *welcome, Joe.*

And thanks be to God.

AMEN.