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“Plenty of Good Room”

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Isaiah 56:1, 6-7; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:21-28

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The three scriptures that we heard this morning all converge around a single theme that can be summarized by the famous African American Spiritual, “Plenty of Good Room.” There is plenty of good room for us in the kingdom of God, plenty of good room for us to eat the crumbs at the master’s table, plenty of good room for us to join together in the house of prayer that God has set aside for all peoples.

As we move away from this general theme of plenty of good room for all, and try to make it particular through the experiences and relationships of our lives, it becomes more challenging.

All of us carry with us this sort of built in profiling mechanism that is almost instinctive, second nature to us. Call it first impressions or sizing people up but whatever it may be, we all do it instinctively. We make this immediate judgment about who people are and what we think they are like. None of us likes to be called bigots, but I wonder if any of us are completely free from stereotypical thinking or labeling of individuals and other peoples. If we are honest and look in the mirror, I know we would all have to admit that we are subject to these kinds of judgments that lead to behaviors that can be downright sinful.

If it is any consolation to you as you heard the Gospel story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman, (loaded words, a woman from Canaan outside the boundaries of Israel, and woman, a second class citizen in the society in which Jesus lived), If it is of any consolation to you, you are in good company because Jesus suffered the same affliction that we do. He had this typical, exclusive Jewish attitude towards those who were the privileged people and those who were not. You may say how can that be? I think it can be because in his humanity Jesus had a change of mind as he encountered this woman from Canaan.

Notice in the story she runs forward knowing that this man in some way was of God, and she shouts out, "Have mercy of me, Lord, my daughter is in trouble." His first response was no response; he said nothing. Even his disciples who were bothered by her shouting, encouraged him to send her away. Finally Jesus stops and encounters the woman; he engages her and tells her, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. My mission as I understand it is first to bring God's kingdom to my people, my people who have forged a relationship a covenant with God through all kinds of trials and tribulations." Still she persisted and knelt before him as a sign of honor and reverence and said, "Lord, help me." He continued with his theme, "How can I help you? It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." I would have gotten up and left quickly after that put down, but she persisted in an amazing retort that stays with us to this day, "Yes, Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the masters table." Almost immediately Jesus got it; he began to realize that God's unlimited plan for salvation was inclusive of all peoples and not exclusive of his own. That the privileged place of the chosen people was not restricted to only those who claimed to be apart of the covenant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob but that all were included. The dialogue brought Jesus around to realize the fuller sense of God's saving plan and helped him move beyond his racial and misogynistic stereotypes of women.

He immediately responded to her, "Woman, great is your faith." His major concern was her love, affection and deep felt pain for her daughter's torment. Jesus said, "Let it be done for you as you wish," and immediately her daughter was healed.

Jesus changed his mind. How was it possible for him to do that? Some commentator's say that Jesus was only testing her faith that he knew all along what he was going to do and heal the daughter. Another commentator says that in his new humanity Jesus came to a new awareness.

This is the first debate in the Gospel accounts where Jesus lost his argument (Harrington) and in doing so came to a new awareness, a new understanding, a new appreciation for the largeness of God's mercy for all peoples, everywhere and at all times, a truth embodied in the Canaanite woman.

Is this not a model for us to follow? That in our encounters with people who are different from us, we have the same opportunity to expand our religious imagination, expand our appreciation and respect for others, their dignity and their place in our lives. Only if we are willing, as Jesus did, to stop and make room for a conversation with those who are different from us.

I believe that is the core truth that can come from this encounter that Jesus had with the Canaanite woman. That you and I in our encounters of life can glean from our relationships with those different from us a new understanding of the greatness of God's plan: all are to be a part of his house of prayer.

Now you know all the hot button issues and groups in our political correct times. Which ones would you include on your list? Where do we have a need for dialogue that could lead to a new awareness of our relationship to them: atheists, Muslims, gays and lesbians, people of color, different gender, the addicted, the divorced, pro-life, pro-choice, those for the death penalty and those against it, environmentalists. There are so many ways we can be polarized not only as a nation but also as a community of faith. As I listen to Joe and others go through the list of issues and controversies that made up the general assembly of our own reformed tradition, I realize that we need to hear the message that there is "plenty of good room" for us all in claiming Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

The African American tradition has been the source of study during the course of these past few weeks and I really want to thank Dawn, Marilyn and Kim who organized the program this summer time of learning. The particular hymn, "Plenty of Good Room" stands out, as the theme of this scripture because it recaptures what W.E.B DuBios says is inherent in the African American tradition. If you want to know the African American tradition do not read Calvin's Institutes or Barth's Dogmatics. Listen to their music for it is in their song.

Lesley Curtis sings:

Refrain:

*Plenty good room (plenty good room),
Plenty good room in my Father's kingdom
Plenty good room (plenty good room),
Choose your seat and sit down*

Verses:

*I would not be a liar/backslider/sinner
I tell you the reason why
'Cause if my Lord should call on me
I wouldn't be ready to die*

What brought the Lord Jesus around was his willingness to talk with this woman in the first place. This woman who was different and outside his perceived mission to serve the chosen people of God. There still is and always will be God's vision of plenty of good room. I challenge you to be open, self critical, and vulnerable. I challenge you to put yourself in the shoes of others and listen to their pain as Jesus listened to the Canaanite woman. It often happens that through such dialogue and conversation we come to understand ourselves better and make changes in our lives for the good of us all. There is plenty of good room.