

August 16, 2020  
The 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Lectionary 20, Year A  
Matthew 15:21-28  
Emmanuel, Norwood, MA  
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### **Breaking the Rules**

As you may know I grew up in a small suburb of Philadelphia where my friends and I enjoyed taking part in many activities in the city which was a just a short train ride away from the town in which I was raised.

The summer that I was 15 years my mom asked if I'd like to join her and my dad on a trek into the city on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July where we would listen to the many artists that performed in the hours leading up to the playing of the 1812 overture and the perfectly choreographed firework show.

As was our custom, and as was recommended by all the media outlets, we took the train downtown and made our way to the art museum where the festivities were taking place.

We found a spot on the ground in front of the steps and, along with many thousands of people, we enjoyed listening to the various artists and conversing with those seated among us. We had a fantastic time listening to the performers, playing card games, laughing about various things, and just enjoying each other's

company. The evening was capped off with a marvelous firework display that far outdid the local fireworks that we usually saw. It was a perfect day.

Once the fireworks ended, we joined the numerous other people that were headed towards the Market East Train Station where we expected to take the train home.

However, when we got to the station we didn't see any listings for the train to Jenkintown which was a little surprising as there were 3 different train lines that ran through Jenkintown and typically one didn't need to wait more than about 10 minutes to catch a train.

It was concerning and my parents began talking amongst themselves about the situation and discussing what we would do and how we would get home as the alternate means of transportation were less than desirable.

As they were discussing it, my mom saw a SEPTA official walk by and she asked him why the boards did not show a listing for the lines that went through Jenkintown and asked when the next train would be departing.

He told us, very kindly, that the last train had left at 11:00 and as it was now 11:30pm we would need to make alternate plans.

My mom questioned him again saying that all the media outlets had encouraged individuals to take public transportation into the city for the 4<sup>th</sup> of July

festivities and asked how it was possible that the last train left at 11:00 when the fireworks themselves didn't end until 11:00.

The official again told us that he was sorry and explained that he had no control of the schedule or what the press communicated and he reiterated that there were no more trains going to Jenkintown and that there was nothing more that he could do and he started to walk away.

At that point my mom, who knew full well what the options were, asked him how exactly he would recommend we get to Jenkintown.

The official replied telling us that we could walk about half a mile to City Hall and take the subway to Broad and Olney from there we could then take the number 55 bus down Old York Road and get off in Jenkintown.

I do not know what it is like now but at that time Broad and Olney was not a safe neighborhood. It was not unheard of to hear on the news about some individual that was the victim of some sort of violence perpetuated in that area. It was not a place we wanted to be in the daytime let alone midnight. Even though I was only 15 I knew it was an area that we should avoid, and I was less than thrilled when I heard that it was the only way to get home. However, the SEPTA official had made it clear that we were out of luck that night and I thought to myself that there was no other choice and I prepared myself for a challenging night.

My mom, however, was not willing to accept that answer and ever so politely, and calmly, she asked him if he would want his wife and daughter going to Broad and Olney at midnight.

The official gave my mom a questioning look and cocked his head while he considered her question. After a few moments he told us to wait right there and that he was going to see what, if anything, could be done.

After about 5 minutes he came back and told us that he had found a conductor and an engineer who were willing to make the trip and that there was a two-car train that was able to be used. He told us it would go no further than Jenkintown and just as soon as they could get the train moved it would board.

Shortly thereafter we heard the call: “Now leaving from track 4 the express train to Jenkintown. All Aboard!”

I remember the sensation of goose bumps as I heard that announcement and the three of us all breathed a collective sigh of relief. We had expected a handful of people to board the train with us and were amazed that there were about 40 or so people joining us on that train.

In order for my mom to get us home safely she needed to be persistent in her plea for what she felt was just.

However, it was not only my mom's persistence that needed to act in this situation it was the official who needed to look beyond the boundaries that had been set up so that he could see possibilities and the official needed to be able cross those boundaries and break those rules so that which was just could happen.

In today's Gospel we encounter a similar situation and hear about a woman who confronts Jesus and asks him to heal her daughter who is afflicted with a demon.

We are told that this woman is a Canaanite and is living in the district of Tyre and Sidon a region on the Mediterranean coast, outside Israel's boundaries. Matthew provides us with these details to make it apparent that Jesus was outside of Israel and that the woman in the story is not Jewish and is, in fact, a Gentile.

Surprisingly, the terms and manners in which this woman, this Gentile, uses to approach Jesus in this passage are "the Son of David" and "Lord" and she even kneels before Jesus. These phrases and actions indicate that she has recognized Jesus as the Messiah; a recognition that the disciples themselves had struggled to make.

Her knowledge of who Jesus is does not help her in her plea and, in fact, her initial cries are ignored by Jesus. As she continues, those cries become aggravating to the disciples who ask Jesus to send her away. Instead of doing as

the disciples ask, Jesus tells the woman that he was only “sent for the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (vs 24), in other words, he was sent for the Jews.

The woman does not give up and in her next appeal she comes and kneels in front of Jesus and again begs for help. Jesus replies to her plea stating that “it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (vs 26).

In this statement Jesus’ reference to the children is another reference to the Israelites and his reference to the dogs is a reference to the Gentiles.

The word used here for dog is not the typical Greek word *kyon* meaning wild dog. Instead the Greek word used here is *kynarion*, meaning small dog or pet dog.

By calling her a pet dog he is telling her, as well as the disciples, that she is loved but he is also reminding the disciples and the woman that she is a gentile and that Jesus’ ministry is not for the Gentiles.

The woman is not willing to let it go, and she responds to Jesus telling him that “even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s tables” (vs 27). She is not asking to be a part of the kingdom or to be a part of Jesus’ overall ministry, she is saying that there is that which overflows from the table and that she too can receive even a small portion of God’s grace and that it will be enough. This

statement tells us that the woman not only recognizes Jesus as the Messiah but that she also believes Jesus is the Messiah.

With that statement Jesus tells the woman that her faith is great, and that he will do as she wishes and heals her daughter that very instant.

Through this story Jesus shows us all that he has, in fact, come for the whole world. But in order to show us this, he must break the rules.

Jesus had come to fulfill that which was written in the scriptures. Jesus was here for the Israelites and all those present, especially the disciples, knew it.

Jesus was able to use this experience to teach his disciples, indeed the world, that God's grace is for everyone.

Today as we enter our sixth month of being socially distant and worshipping via Zoom, we see that God has broken, and continues to break, the rules all around us.

Before the middle of March who would have ever thought that worship could happen virtually.

Who would have thought that we would be celebrating communion outside as a separate service?

Who would have ever thought our weekly worship service, our weekly prayer group, and our “*Dear Church*” discussions would be attended by people from many different states?

Who would have ever thought that Emmanuel Lutheran Church, in Norwood MA would have a presence on YouTube?

Who would have thought that our public witness to the community would not only continue but would be enhanced during a time of pandemic when it is necessary for us to be apart?

In each of these there was an accepted way in how things were, or were not, to be done. It is here, in our community, in our nation, and in the world that rules have been broken and God’s grace has flown forth shared with the community and the world.

Throughout our society there are numerous rules that guide us. I am not talking about the rules that are used to govern our communities and our country but the unwritten rules that guide us in our day to day activities; the rules that are followed and accepted as the way things are and the way things have always been. Many of these rules affect what is expected of us and how we behave as both individuals and as a society and they lead us to questions that we need to ask ourselves every day:



How do we treat our neighbors?

How do we care for those that are downtrodden?

How do we handle the racial concerns that plague our nation?

How do we address socio-economic concerns?

How do we work through cultural differences?

What rules of what is proper and what is expected are associated with these questions? Do these rules need to be broken allowing us to do share and show God's grace to the world around us?

Working across boundaries to break the rules is challenging, it takes commitment, love, and persistence.

Jesus show us the way and shows us how it is possible and shows us that God's grace is for all humankind and no rule can stop it from being shared.

Thanks be to God! Amen