

Winfield United Church Reflection – August 16, 2020  
by Rev. Joan Kessler

## **Borders**

*Matthew 15:21-28*

Article: <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/paradoxes-of-immobility-coronavirus-and-the-unsettling-of-borde/12182784>

This morning I am thinking about borders, what they mean to us and how they shape our lives and our activities. And as we have had few conversations the past several months that haven't involved COVID 19, in some way, today's message looks at how our experience of borders as human beings have changed because of the pandemic.

COVID has changed our mobility patterns... how over the past five or so months has the arrival of a pandemic changed your movements? Remember the first time you went to Save On to do the simple task of getting your groceries... there were tape lines on the sidewalk spaced six feet apart... when you entered through the one door, you were met with hand sanitizing station and that was your first stop... then you looked to the floor to follow the arrows to enable one directional shopping. With shopping completed, there was the one aisle appointed for queuing up and you were far removed from customers checking out and you waited your turn. Often through this whole new process, there were staff reminding you to not enter here, and please go around that way and wait behind this line, etc. If I'm honest, I remember feeling rather resentful about the whole lack of freedom grocery shopping now presented and how I bemoaned not being able to just do my business in peace and not be told what to do... it was a new and unsettling experience for me that I did not enjoy. This is a simplistic example of how COVID has restricted our movement. Those among us who are travellers, you have likely felt the impact of nations closing their borders to foreigners, of having to cut travel plans early so you could return home. Some families are still geographically separated by the closed Canada/US border and will continue to be so for at least another month as we heard announced on Friday.

In essence, COVID has unsettled borders around the globe. Migration has come to a standstill. This week I did some reading on this topic and found the virus has created a very different playing field when it comes to global movements. Historically, those who live in the global south know what it is to have their movements restricted or denied, forcing them to become refugee and asylum seekers; the stressors of relocating to a foreign place, of the sense of un-wantedness and otherness that meets them... this is what is known as immobility trauma. Ironically, because of COVID, we in the first world are in essence “locked down” and can no longer travel with the freedom previously taken for granted. Earlier this spring, refugees and asylum seekers in some instances were safer in their native countries because of the absence of widespread COVID, unlike the western world. The relatively privileged citizens of northern hemisphere nations such as in North America and Europe who have traditionally held passports which permitted them unhindered movement, are now confined to stay home within their own geographical borders, which causes its own form of immobility trauma. Meanwhile, the southern hemisphere has closed its borders to travel from Europe and America in order to prevent the spread of infection. In essence, the virus has halted migration around the globe like a great leveler... and how will this experience for those of us who enjoy privilege of movement change our views on future immigration policy... of who is in and who is out?

We, the privileged of the first world, are living into what it means to have freedom of movement rescinded. Now we are being asked to wear masks in public spaces. Students returning to classrooms in a few weeks time will don masks and we wonder what that will feel like. Churches are also needing to carefully consider building space usage and public occupancy and how access is going to feel more like a privilege than a right, with special instructions and requirements needed to enjoy things as we once did...but as I heard stated more than once this past week, things will never be as they used to be... but we will adjust and adapt because that is what it means to be human and part of a continuing evolutionary process.

In this morning's reading from Matthew, we hear a story about all kinds of borders: geographic, religious, racial, and gender-based. Jesus is in non-Jewish territory and there is ethnic tension in the air. And we get a

glimpse into Jesus' thinking about issues of borders when a local Canaanite woman comes to him seeking a blessing for her sick child. She is determined; she is persistent. She isn't leaving until she gets what she has come for and that is help from Jesus. But Jesus, in showing us his most human characteristics, has little interest in her request. Jesus shows us his bias and his privilege by refusing to help her and he thinks he can send her off by stating in a rather cruel way that his ministry is meant for some, but not for her people..."It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she is quick-thinking and responds, "Yes Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." Jesus has been shown up. He reconsiders and tells the woman great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish". She is lightening fast, wise and unrelenting. She tears down his resistance and reframes his mission to be open to all because of her words.

Today, we honor a woman from Canaan...for her courage and tenacity to speak up and not leave Jesus alone until she got what she came for. She provides us with a glimpse this day, as we struggle with the absence of freedoms we once enjoyed, what it is to be a person on the margins, to be the Other. COVID will teach humanity many things. We will hopefully come to realize the importance of human adaptation and that old dogs really can learn new tricks...that we can learn new ways of conducting ourselves that keep us and others safe and healthy. And we will become a more compassionate society... we will empathize and sympathize with those we encounter, friend and stranger alike. That's my hope of this message for today... and what I learned from a woman from Canaan. Be persistent, ask for what you need, be patient, and be kind. May we consider this day our borders, the space we occupy and consider what it feels like to be the Other.

Amen and Amen.