

DATE: August 16th, 2026
SCRIPTURE: Matthew 15:21-28
THEME: In the kin-dom of God, there are no borders.
SUBJECT: Nationalism, God's Kin-dom
TITLE: Crossing the Border ("Crossing Over" series #2)

ESSENTIAL QUESTION: How are we to relate to those outside the boundaries?

Prayer: Gracious and loving Spirit, fill our minds with your Word and help us to be curious. Increase our love for one another, and inspire us with a commitment to create a transformed world, starting with ourselves. Amen.

Second of a three-week series: "Crossing Over". Last week, we journeyed with the disciples and Jesus over a small northern stretch of the Sea of Galilee. They had just left thousands who were miraculously filled with a hearty meal of fish and bread. Today, we'll follow Jesus' small band northward to the region of Tyre and Sidon at the edge of the Mediterranean Sea. This marks the first time in Matthew where Jesus interacts with a non-Jew; it's also one of the rare times in all the gospels when Jesus talks with a woman who is outside of the Jewish community. I can only think of two instances: the woman at a well in Samaria and this Canaanite woman. Both women exist outside the boundaries — across the border, even at the margins of their own cultural space. How does Jesus relate to them? How are we to relate to people outside the boundaries?

Centuries from now, how will history books record the people and events of our time? Perhaps they'll say we're in a period of heightened nationalism where "the American people" are fiercely patriotic, that we're closing borders and expelling immigrants as a result, and that there are deep divisions within society. I'm thinking mostly about middle school and high school history books, or whatever students will use

in two or three hundred years to learn about the past. I'm thinking about how history will be presented to people in the 8 to 18 year-old-age range because that's when people build the foundation of their understanding and opinions about the world. Schoolbook history is survey history that doesn't go into a great deal of depth or nuance, so high school graduates often see just the broad brush strokes, unless they've had a teacher who goes off-text and provides alternate readings.

Think about how thick your high school U.S. history book was - maybe 600 or 700 pages, including maps and pictures. Maybe it started with a chapter about Indigenous people before launching into European settlement where the English ultimately gained the upper hand. That book might have gotten up to the period called Reconstruction, so about 250 years of history took 600 (or so) pages to tell and STILL it offered only a broad overview that didn't convey much about the 20,000 year long story of the 50-60 million people who were here before Europeans arrived, nor about the 12 million enslaved people who were kidnapped in Africa and brought here, nor much even about French, Spanish and Dutch settlers. You can write a 10,000 page book, but who would read that? Who would buy that? So, we study history in our early years that appeals to a marketable audience - a history that's a mile wide and an inch deep - most of it highlighting a particular cultural history.

Much of the Bible contains history. My Bible is 1,273 pages long. Some of it contains poetry, some wisdom literature, some letters. So I'll estimate that about 1,200 years of history is covered in about the same amount of space as a high school history textbook. Lots of detail is left out — lots of perspective, lots of nuance — but careful readers of history will pay attention to the whole story.

Matthew's gospel is a small piece of that story and it has its own perspective. It's the most nationalistic of all the gospel accounts. It appeals to a Jewish audience that is very familiar with Hebrew scripture and messianic prophecy. A casual reading of this short historical account of Jesus' life might lead one to believe that Matthew isn't interested in crossing into territory beyond Jewish culture. As Jesus sends his disciples to drive out demons and heal diseases in chapter 10, he issues this command: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel (10:5-6). In today's story of his interaction with the Canaanite woman, Jesus completely ignores the woman when she first cries out for mercy. And after the disciples prompt him to send the woman away, Jesus replies, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." Further, up to this point in Matthew, Jesus interacts with no one outside the Jewish community. Clearly this is a story that places certain people and their culture above all else, right? That's what nationalism is all about.

Christian Nationalists in our county want to read Matthew this way. They would read history from a particular perspective while alienating other perspectives, and would center a certain view of Christianity, a culturally white Christianity. Rev. Julie Calhoun-Bryant is the rector at St. Alban's Episcopal Church in Syracuse. Here's how she describes the goal of Christian Nationalism: "[It teaches] that America (sic) was founded as a Christian nation and seeks to return to this fictional past. Christian nationalism further seeks to merge Christian and American (sic) identities, distorting both the Christian faith and America's constitutional democracy through the negation of separation of Church and State. Christian nationalists demand Christianity be privileged by the State and implies that to be a good American one must be a good Christian, as narrowly defined by the movement. It often overlaps with and provides cover for white

supremacy and racial subjugation” (*What is Christian Nationalism and How does it Distort the Gospel of Jesus Christ?*, Episcopal Diocese of Central New York, August 1, 2024.) It would seem that Matthew’s Jewish Nationalism is the playbook for today’s Christian Nationalists.

It would seem ... from a hasty, partial reading, that is. What does a complete and careful reading of Matthew say? To answer that, let’s first understand the context of Matthew’s community. This gospel was written about a decade or two after the destruction of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem (CE 70). That destruction had an impact on the Jewish faith that is difficult for us to understand, but it bears some resemblance to the aftermath of the attack on the Twin Towers in 2001. That event led directly to the creation of the Dept. of Homeland Security and ICE. The Patriot Act expanded the government’s power to monitor phone calls, track financial data and detain suspected terrorists (as defined by certain government officials). All presidents since 2001 have responded to rising fear of perceived threats with stronger immigration laws. Perhaps history books 300 years from now will characterize our nation as exclusive and anti-immigrant. But we all know that that isn’t the full story.

It’s widely understood by Biblical scholars that the book of Matthew was based on the book of Mark. Mark’s gospel is the only gospel thought to have been written before the temple’s destruction - before Jewish culture changed profoundly. In fact, the time frame between Mark and Matthew’s writings is about the same as the time frame between 9/11 and today. Both Mark and Matthew include the story we read today, so it’s interesting to note the difference in their accounts. Mark focuses on casting out the demon in the woman’s daughter. Dr. Eunyung Lim of Middlebury College says, “Matthew’s story is about faith overcoming entrenched social divisions” (Working

Preacher, commentary on Matthew 15:21-28, August 16th, 2026). A careful reading of Matthew, then, shows that similar cultural changes may have taken place in Matthew's time as in our time - over the same period of time (~25 years). And so, while I've always loved the raw, gritty, unfiltered perspective in Mark, I'm coming to appreciate Matthew's relevance for our own time.

As Jewish culture was changing following the temple's destruction - possibly becoming more nationalistic - Matthew's audience was also changing, but in a different way. Dr. Lim says that they were once a strictly Jewish law-abiding group of people, but they were in the process of breaking away from those who continued to hold on tighter to this way of thinking. Their understanding of Jewish messianic prophecy had led them to believe that Jesus was, in fact, the Messiah. They had also read Mark's gospel and believed that they were living in the dawn of a new age when the gentiles would come to Zion - the dwelling place of God according to Jewish prophecy - alongside the Jewish people. That belief alone made them outcasts. Worse, they were apostates. They had once believed in Jewish supremacy and have now stepped away from that belief. Who knows, maybe they were even called terrorists.

Many have trouble with the passage we read today. It can make Jesus look like a full-on Jewish nationalist. But wasn't he supposed to welcome all people - Jewish and Gentile? Didn't he talk about tearing down walls and eliminating borders? The flow of the passage we read today is significant. I think it models the transformation that Jesus is calling all people to make.

The Canaanite woman first cries out to Jesus, "Lord, Son of David (Heir to the House of David), have mercy on me!" "Son of David" is a very nationalistic title. When he's addressed in this way, Jesus completely ignores the woman. Scripture says that

he did not answer a word. It's as if Matthew is saying that cries for mercy from the gentiles who are now part of God's new age are ignored by Jewish nationalists. And, playing the role of a nationalist, Jesus delivers the old tired line, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel" (15:24). The woman then changes Jesus' title, addressing him simply as "Lord" which is a universal title that has no nationalistic meaning. It is then that Jesus, the nationalist, starts to transform into Jesus, the internationalist, as he takes his first step across the border. He says, "It isn't right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." "Yes, Lord," [the woman] said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table" (15:26-27). Don't miss the word play here in Greek because it reinforces the transformation that is taking place. The Greek word for 'Lord' is *kyrios* as in, *kyrie eleison* (lord, have mercy) which the woman cries out from the very start. The Greek word for 'dog' is *kynarion* (from which we get the word 'canine'). Matthew wants us to connect 'kyrios' with 'kynarion'; he wants us to see the outcast dog in the Lord Jesus and the Lord Jesus in the outcast dog. Through the Canaanite woman's faith in God's mercy, which prevails over the stereotypes attached to her identity, Jesus models God's will for all people who still hold to nationalism and a belief in the superiority of one group of people over others.

In his final words, Jesus confirms the transformation from nationalism to a borderless kin-dom. "Woman, you have great faith! Your request [for mercy] has been granted." [The woman's] daughter was healed from that very moment (15:28). Healing happens when borders are erased. Mercy prevails when we have great faith in the all-inclusive Beloved Community of God. The words of the prophet Isaiah that describe the new age become true; it will be an age ruled by the merciful, loving, compassionate Servant of the Lord. Matthew quotes those words a few chapters earlier: "Here is my

servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. ... In his name the nations will put their hope” (Matthew 12:18, 21, quoted from Isaiah 42:1, 4).

The age of boundaries is over. Those who cling to it are missing the mark because they have not read their History Book from beginning to end. The era of defining and dividing belongs to the past. The ‘kyrios’ is merciful and the ‘kynarion’ are included. There is no border crossing because borders are irrelevant. They’re illusions, false realities that have already been obliterated in the kin-dom of God. To understand this is to truly understand the radical, scandalous message of Matthew.