

Rev. Mike Cole
Providence Presbyterian Church
Twentieth Sunday In Ordinary Time
August 16, 2026
Psalm 133:1-3; Matthew 15:21-28

"Turned Outside In"

Growing up in the suburbs of Houston before it was so huge, was a fun time in my childhood. My friends and I had great fun building forts and running the roads. There were usually 5-6 of us who got together every day in the summer to hang out.

However, there was one kid who was always following us around the neighborhood. He was about three years younger than my friends and I and we really didn't like him tagging along trying to be like us. We called him "Pestering Pete." At times we were pretty mean to him, trying our hardest to make him leave us alone. After all, we wanted to do what we wanted to do without having to listen to the constant chattering of this pipsqueak.

Have you ever known someone like "Pestering Pete," someone who just wouldn't give up trying to fit in, someone who wouldn't take "no" for an answer? Interestingly enough, Jesus had a "Pestering Pete," of his own. She was a nameless woman from Canaan, a Gentile territory. Prior to her emergence, Jesus had been explaining some parables to his disciples and he marveled at their denseness. Jesus couldn't figure why they could not get it.

Then Jesus took a bold step beyond the geographical and religious boundaries of his region, going to the shadowy district of Tyre and Sidon. It is there that this pestering woman begins following him and his disciples shouting requests and pleas to him. It didn't matter to the disciples that she was asking for a miracle not for herself, but her daughter. They were tired of her pestering ways and asked Jesus to send her away.

At this point, Jesus was clear about this mission. He thought had come only for the lost sheep of Israel. That surprises us. Jesus thought that he came only for the respectable folks who don't shout and don't draw undue attention to their plight. That was what the Messiah was expected to do - reconstitute Israel and gather the scattered sheep.

This Gentile woman didn't fit into that plan of salvation at all. She was not one of the lost sheep of Israel. She was an outsider. Just like the wise men from the east were outsiders.

In Matthew's Gospel the wise men also intruded into a story that seemed neatly packaged for the insiders. Matthew used the Magi to begin to explain the expanding the boundaries of Jesus' ministry from his birth. I believe he also used this Canaanite woman to do the same thing here in the middle of his gospel. Not only that, but I also believe she was instrumental in getting Jesus to enlarge his vision of his mission.

We tend to think that Jesus arrived with a fully formed vision of his mission, but this episode reveals that Jesus was learning and expanding his mission every day. The woman persistently demanded help from Jesus because her daughter was ill and needed a miracle of healing, and she needed it immediately. The disciples, functioning like the Secret Service, urged Jesus to get rid of her. When Jesus brushed her off with a little slogan about not giving the children's bread to dogs ("dogs" was a favorite term for Gentiles), she retorted, "But even the dogs are allowed to gather up the children's crumbs from under the table. That's all I'm asking." That's all it took.

This was a learning moment for Jesus. In that instant Jesus came to the realization that his mission was not just to the lost sheep of Israel, but to all the lost sheep of the world. Her response really got to Jesus. He exclaimed, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

According to Matthew, from that moment on, Jesus' mission took on a different tone and a new fervor. Perhaps in that moment Jesus realized that there were no boundaries for his mission. He was sent to save not just some but everyone, not just there but everywhere, not just then but for all time.

The enormity of this realization would stagger us. But not Jesus. His life was so in tune with God that he readily accepted the extension of his mission by healing the woman's daughter. As a man, Jesus was a product of his environment and culture. He naturally assumed that his mission was as limited as his humanly world view. As God in human form, Jesus' compassion expanded the boundaries his culture had put in place.

His love, compassion, and healing power are not just for the "insiders." His healing power overflows even to this Gentile woman, who for the Israelites was the ultimate outsider. That is comforting to us whenever we feel more like an outsider than an insider. We can trust in the fact that Jesus' ministry knows no bounds. There is no one beyond the reach of Jesus. We cannot think of a person, no matter who they are or what they have done, who is outside the realm that Jesus rules.

We humans are really adept at erecting barriers and boundaries to designate some as inside and some outside. But Jesus' ministry tore down those barriers and boundaries so that everyone, every one would be an insider even though most if not all of us feel like outsiders.

If I were to ask for a show of hands – which I’m definitely not!- of who among us feels like an outsider, we would be amazed to see how many hands go up. I would venture to say that everyone here feels or has felt at one time or another like an outsider. As we glance around this sanctuary we think that everyone else is the insider and we are the outsider. It seems like everybody else has their life together better than us. Nobody else has problems like we have. Nobody else has to endure what we endure.

But those lies keep us isolated from one another and separated from God. As long as we think that no one else ever feels like the outsider we feel like, we are destined to keep trying to fix whatever is broken in our lives by ourselves. But that’s not necessary in God’s realm.

God breaks down those barriers that separate us so that we can all experience the “insiders” life - a life of fulfillment. It’s God’s way of turning us outside in. Jesus confirmed that He is always seeking to bring the outsiders in, even when the outsiders appear to be insiders.

The question for us today and all our days is: Are you ready to be turned outside in? Then, you’ve come to the right place where everyone is considered an insider by God!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen