Year A Proper 15 8.16.26

When God Unlocks the Game Rev. Barb Ballenger

When I was a kid in Catholic school we played a lot of Four Square, a four-player game where the players bounced a tennis ball to one another. If you missed it, or dropped it, or bounced your ball on a line of the playing grid, you were out. And there might be a long line of kids waiting to take your place in the game. So there was a little ritual that we would invoke to keep that line from forming. We'd lock the game.

There was even a little incantation that we would recite:

Tick Tock the game is locked and nobody else can play, and if they do I'll take my shoe and beat them till they're black and blue. Hurray.

I know. Catholic School, right? Always with the ritual.

Now throughout my life, I have to admit, I have been on both sides of that little rhyme. And I'm sure if we all took a moment to think about it, we could pinpoint those times when we were locked safely in, and locked completely out.

Can I play? No, we locked the game. You can't afford it. You're not the right fit. We have rules against admitting people like you. All the seats up front are reserved. You've already taken more than your fair share.

Today's scriptures are about unlocking the game. And they warn us. People will get angry – the more powerful, the angrier. It's hard to give up the right to lock the game.

First, we have this beautiful passage from Isaiah, which promises membership in the community to those who had been excluded from it elsewhere in the Scriptures -- people like foreign proselytes and eunuchs, who had been sexually mutilated so they could hold places in foreign service or in harams. Their desire and love for the Lord swings open the doors to God's house of prayer, provides them a place on God's Holy mountain.

"Thus says the Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered."

The Scriptures themselves will wrestle with this concept of who is locked in, and who is locked out of God's people, who is chosen and who is not. Parts of the book of Isaiah weigh in strongly on unlocking the game. That's why Isaiah is often quoted in the new Testament – it's an important text to the Jesus movement.

And then we have this really interesting passage from the Gospel of Matthew, which begins with a conflict with the Pharisees. Now the Pharisees are the ultimate game lockers – their name comes from a Hebrew word that means to separate. [1] They are particularly caught up with ritual purity, and just ahead

[1] Levine, Amy-Jill . " Visions of Kingdoms." In The Oxford History of the Biblical World. Oxford Biblical Studies Online. 14-Aug-2020. <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/book/obso-9780195139372/obso-9780195139372-div1-109>.

of today's Gospel they call out Jesus' followers for not washing their hands, which is a tradition of the elders that should lock the unwashed out of temple worship. Of course to our ears now steeped in the hygienics required in this period of COVID 19, this might not sound like such a bad thing. Heck throw in mask and gloves, while you're at it. But this is 2020 and Jesus is not having it, because he sees it for what it is: a hypocritical power play, which he points out to them in no uncertain terms, - oh they may wash their hands, but then they break the commandments left and right.

This is the lead up to today's Gospel, where Jesus decides to do some public teaching on whether the Pharisees get to lock the game. It's not the food someone puts into their mouth with dirty hands that makes them unfit to worship God. Rather it's the word that springs from the evil intentions that they nurtured within -- murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. They can lock their own door, but it's not because they have dirty hands.

Jesus has a clear sense of how God works in Israel and his own role in making sure that no one locks the game. He wants the least ones of his people to know that it is not the condition of their skin but the content of their character that will determine if the doors to the Kingdom swing open.

On this point Jesus is bathed in blessed assurance, which he takes with him right into the region of Tyre and Sidon, his next stop. There he encounters a Canaanite woman, who asks him to heal her daughter. Now Canaanites are not part of Israel -- quite the opposite. Still this woman names Jesus as the son of David, sees his power as a messiah of Israel, and asks to be given a share of God's healing power.

Jesus ignores her. *Tick Tock.*

But the woman will not be silent. She shouts all the louder, so much so that his disciples begin to get a little angry and they ask to send her away.

"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," Jesus explains in his own defense.

The Game is Locked.

And even when she kneels in front of him and asks for help, he responds: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.

And nobody else can play.

But the woman is not having it. "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

I need to say right here that I find this one of the most painful statements in the Christian scriptures. What this kneeling desperate women has to do and to say to gain access to the Kingdom. And I find it one of the most believable, given what women have always been forced to do in order for them or their children to enter the game.

And if they do I'll take my shoe and beat them till their black and blue. Hooray.

Something happens to Jesus in that moment. Something changes. I wonder if he can hear Isaiah saying: "Thus says the Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered."

I wonder if Jesus' own argument with the Pharisees comes back to him – perhaps his words take a twist: "It's not what goes into the mouth that makes a person righteous but what comes out of it."

Because when the woman opens her mouth, the cry of the poor comes out, the love of a mother comes out, faith in the healing power of God comes out.

And Jesus had been just about to deny her the crumbs under the table.

"Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish" he says—a bit passively I might add. And he steps out of the way of God's healing.

Why do we remember this painful moment in the ministry of Jesus? Why did Matthew's community, made largely of Jewish Christians, retell it? Why do we put it right here on Sunday morning, and not tuck it away in the weekday lectionary?

Because it's so easy to grab the keys to the kingdom and lock the door tight. Because when certain people have been left out of the game long enough, it can be very difficult to see their faces and to hear their cries.

But God sees. And God hears. And God unlocks the game.

When I was a kid in Catholic school, I was always told that Jesus died to open the gate of heaven.

I wonder if this moment in the region of Tyre and Sidon was his dry run.