

WHO DESERVES?

Romans 11:1-2, 29-32
Matthew 15:21-28

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TEXT: Matthew 15:28 “Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.”

PURPOSE: To urge us to embrace a faith-practice which regards everyone as equally deserving of God’s grace, justice, and healing.

There’s been a lot of talk about the developing of a vaccine which will protect us against the coronavirus. The world certainly has pinned its hopes on finding, producing, and dispensing a vaccine which will mean that we can relax some of the strategies we’ve been using to prevent the spread of the virus and get back to some version of normal living.

I have been amazed at what’s involved in finding, producing and distributing a vaccine which is reasonably effective. Beyond the scientific and production efforts, there are huge controversies about distribution. Not everyone in the world, or even in our own country, will be able to be vaccinated at once. There won’t be enough doses, or enough distribution points, for that to be possible. So how will it be determined who gets the vaccines first? Who will make those decisions, and what will be taken into account?

Lots of us would agree that health professionals and first responders are obvious priorities. But there are others who are saying that especially vulnerable populations should be as close to the front of the line as possible, because they are the people who can’t maintain social distancing and don’t have access to healthcare resources. Questions about the distribution of the vaccine invite a global perspective. Perhaps the best way to reduce the spread of the disease is to treat world’s most disadvantaged first. But that privileges a poor person in India, or a person stuck in a refugee camp, or a homeless person living outside or in a crowded shelter, before us. How do we feel about that?

These questions concerning who is more or less deserving of a vaccine raise an issue that has troubled the church since the days of Jesus himself. At least twice in Matthew’s gospel, he recalled that Jesus confined his and his disciples’ ministry to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel.” (Matthew 10:6 and 15:24) The first time occurred when Jesus was giving his disciples marching orders for their first missionary journey. In that context, you could argue that he had them work only with the people of Israel because this was their first mission, and it was prudent to start with their own people.

But what Jesus said in today’s text is not nearly as easy to justify. There was a desperate mother right in front of him, begging for help for her daughter. The woman was a Canaanite, a foreigner, not one of the lost sheep of Israel. So Jesus said, “she’s none of my business. She’s not a member of my parish.” Jesus even went so far as to be rude with her, when he said: “It’s not right to take the children’s food and throw it to

the dogs.” What? A mother makes a plea for her daughter, and Jesus insinuates that because her daughter is of a different ethnic background, she’s no better than a dog? What kind of extravagant love is this? Is this the Jesus we think we will find on every single page of the Gospel, a Jesus who is ready and willing to heal anyone and everyone who comes his way, even some who don’t ask for his healing?

Whatever was going on between the Canaanite woman and Jesus, there is no doubt that the story reflects a dilemma that deeply troubled the early church. Was it the business of the church to give aid and support just to believers, or even, just to deserving believers, or to any and all who came to them in need? In the First Letter to Timothy (4:9 ff), there is a detailed discussion about how the church should determine if a widow is deserving of the church’s continuing care. Some deserve that care, according to the instruction outlined there, but many do not. Lots of the “loving others” that is called for in the New Testament is love that is encouraged among the members of the believing community, and is not meant to be shared freely with non-believers. Maybe we’d like to have the encouragement be more expansive, but that is rarely the intent of the text. (See, for instance, John 13:34-35)

The passage we heard from Paul’s Letter to the Romans turns the whole problem on its head. Today’s passage is part of a longer, and exceedingly complex argument in which Paul wrestled with the irrevocable nature of God’s relationship with Israel now that Jesus had gathered a new community who were the newly chosen people. Now that Gentiles, that is, non-Jews, have embraced the gospel, what is to be done with the lost sheep of the house of Israel who reject Jesus as the promised Messiah? Rather than condemning them, Paul rather daringly asserted that they remained part of God’s saving plan, and insisted that God would take care of them in God’s own way.

By the end of Matthew’s Gospel, after his resurrection, Jesus charged his disciples to go into all the world and make disciples of every nation. So whatever his problem had been with the Canaanite mother, he apparently got over it by the time he was raised from the dead. Nonetheless, the issue of who deserves God’s care remains with us, Christ’s church. Are we allowed, perhaps even required, to limit the love we offer, to manage boundaries for grace? Perhaps it is prudent to limit our care only to members of our own church. After all, we don’t have sufficient resources to help everyone, so it makes good sense, as they say, for charity to begin at home.

Here’s another idea: Helpers undoubtably last a lot longer if they confine their helping to people who are responsive to being helped, and who express gratitude for the help they’ve received. Why should we be using ourselves up for the sake of people who don’t appreciate the investment of time and energy we make in them? Or, how about this? It makes good sense to confine our helping to people who toward taking

responsibility for their situation. What good is it for us to use our meager resources to pay back rent for someone who won't work out a budget and stick to it?

After all, as Jesus himself said, "It is not right to take the children's food" – that is, the care and support that deserving people, well, deserve – "and throw it to the dogs." (Matthew 15:26) Maybe there will be people who offer a sanitized version of this line as a way to determine who deserves the COVID vaccine. It's not right, some will say, to give the vaccine to those people, whoever they are, when we paid for its development with our tax dollars.

Except that here is what I have learned, and God has seen to it that I learn it over and over again: apparent outsiders turn out to be insiders, the deserving turn out to be undeserving, the undeserving turn out to be deserving, and the whole lot of us, no matter what is in our credit or debit columns, stand in need of grace and mercy beyond measure. Here it is, straight from the heart of Paul: (Romans 11:32) "God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all." I like the way Eugene Peterson renders this verse: "In one way or another, God makes sure that we all experience what it means to be outside so that he can personally open the door and welcome us back in."¹

Try this story on for size. Back in June of 2003, when I was pastor of First Church in Concord, I came out of my office to find a lanky man with snow white hair and steely blue eyes waiting for me in the lobby. The man's name was Marshall Gifford. Years before he showed up in that church, Marshall had been a lay minister serving UCC churches in New Hampshire. But when I met him, he was in need, so he went to the New Hampshire Conference for assistance. The conference staff didn't know how to handle his situation, so, assuming First Church would know, because of our work with homeless people, they sent him over to us.

As I pieced together his story, I learned that Marshall, who was in his eighties, had been more or less homeless for about twenty years, and that he was quite comfortable living out of his car and a storage unit. In fact, his problem was that his old car was dead, and he wanted us to buy him a new one. That was something we were not willing to do. We wanted to help Marshall find a decent, permanent place to live. Let's just say at this point that an extraordinarily complicated relationship developed. Marshall was congenial, but fundamentally uncooperative. He was nearly deaf, but he could be more or less deaf depending on what others were saying to him. Working with him was nothing short of exasperating. Finally we got frustrated and told him we wouldn't help him anymore. He had taken up way too much of my and

¹Peterson, Eugene, The Message; NavPress, Colorado Springs, 2002, page 2054

other people's time, and he had used up way too much of our charity for no results.

So he stayed away for a few months. Then, he would stop in now and then, as charming as ever, and he even stayed in the church's cold-weather homeless shelter for a few nights. Once, he came by after a minor car accident left him with a nasty bang on the head. Eventually, he was admitted to the hospital with complications from that accident. He became less and less responsive, and one day, some food went down the wrong tube. He nearly died, but instead, he wound up in the Intensive Care Unit. All together, he was in the hospital for over six months. After it was over, I talked with the hospital president about his situation, and he estimated that Marshall's care might have cost half a million dollars.

He finally recovered enough to be transferred to a rehabilitation facility, but that place was too far away for me to continue visiting him. Eventually, he died there, and it was my sad privilege to officiate at this funeral and burial in the New Hampshire Veteran's Cemetery. Present at those services were his ex-wife and two adult daughters, who had mostly been estranged from him for all those years that he had been homeless.

Back to the time that he was in the ICU. I was visiting Marshall one day when a doctor I knew came in to perform a procedure on him. We commented that he would have died if it had not been for the hospital's "risk management" policy, which dictates that, in the absence of specific instructions, the hospital do everything it can to save a life in order to avoid the risk of a lawsuit. The doctor and I discussed the ethics of that policy. I think I was the one who, employing considerable irony, quoted Ebenezer Scrooge's line about decreasing the surplus population. The doctor fired back with the clearest of conviction. "That's not our call," he insisted. "We don't get to distinguish the value of one life over another." Which sounds like the direction that the Gospel is taking. It doesn't get there all at once, but then, neither do we. If we let the hard story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman stand as it is without any tinkering on our part, neither, even, does Jesus get there all at once.

So who does deserve the grace of God? Who does deserve the healing power of Christ? Who does deserve the church's investment of time and energy and resources? Apparently, no one deserves it, and therefore, everyone deserves it, not because of who we are, but because that is the very nature of God's continually expanding grace. For that, we may all say, thanks be to God.