

August 20, 2017
Pentecost 11
Nevertheless, She Persisted
Isaiah 56:1, 6-8; Psalm 67; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:10-28
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Fellow Ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
Gracia y paz del Dio, Padre, Hijo e Espíritu Santo
Grace and peace to you from God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Nevertheless, she persisted.
It has been a disturbing week. Last Saturday's events in Charlottesville, VA have weighed heavily on our country.

A terrorist attack in Barcelona, Spain has us reeling. News of attacks in Norway, police shootings in Florida and Pennsylvania, and the frenetic anticipation of a total solar eclipse have rendered newscasters and kitchen table conversations breathless.

We come here today seeking comfort, solace and good news. Instead we are met with a most disturbing gospel lesson. In this story Jesus seems so un-Jesus-like! His words and actions don't match anything we know about his life and ministry! We are confronted with a series of texts that challenge us to recognize and accept the foreigner and the outcast. Psalm 67 extends the borders of God's community to all nations and all peoples, even to the ends of the earth.

Paul rebukes the Gentile Christians in Rome because they seem to think they alone are God's favored people. And, even Jesus falls prey to the ethnocentric habits of his time.

The Canaanite woman comes to Jesus asking for help and he blows her off. His response to her is so... so... excluding! "I have only come for the lost sheep of Israel!" Nevertheless, she persisted. On her knees, she begs him "Lord have mercy". She calls him the Son of David – the Messianic King. The disciples have not even recognized him as Messiah at this point. Using an ethnic slur, he tells her, "Sorry, I have come for the lost sheep of Israel. You're not included. I can't take bread from God's good people and give it to you, a Canaanite dog!"

I know, disturbing, right? Jesus calls this woman a female dog, a bitch! The language is strong and disturbing; the entire message of the gospel is strong and sometimes disturbing.

This portrait of Jesus is scandalously human. This is not the Jesus of our imagination. But, we ought to be thankful the Gospel writers didn't leave it out. Because, in this story, we see the real humanness of Jesus. We see Jesus taking on our sin of racism, exclusion and bigotry. We see Jesus derisive and dismissive toward the "other." We see Jesus hostile to a woman who is a foreigner.

Nevertheless, she persisted. She does not deny that the Israelite lives matter. She points out that Canaanite lives also matter. And Jesus is changed by the woman's persistent faith. The woman manages to break open Jesus' heart. In repentance and mercy, Jesus extends healing to her and her daughter. She is included. She is cared for. She is loved. Her life and her daughter's life matter.

And that's really the point. That's the lesson. That's why the Gospel writers kept this in the story and didn't edit it out.

Like Jesus, our hearts need to be broken open by our encounters with the "other", those who are different from us. Those who don't look, think or act like we do.

Even in this safe place, the church, it sometimes looks like “No Canaanites Allowed.” But, if we are open to the encounter, if we truly strive to KNOW the other person, if we truly LISTEN – the other person can break our hearts open to the richness of God’s grace and mercy for us all. And, ultimately to the common humanity that unites us despite our differences. We will recognize a commonality that does not erase the differences, but leads us to celebrate our diversity.

Neo-Nazis, the KKK, other white supremacist groups, indeed all extremist and supremacist groups, including ISIS are to be pitied. For whatever reason, they have missed this gift from God and have, instead succumbed to hate, and fear and violence.

To hate or exclude another person because of the color of their skin, or their religion, or their language or because of who they love is such an empty, life-less way to live. It is a life that makes the Devil smile.

Like our sisters and brothers in Christ in Charlottesville last Saturday, we need to unequivocally stand up against all claims of supremacy, to all forms of racism, and any behavior or ideology that crushes another human being rather than building up the body of Christ.

And here is the most difficult thing to do: We are called to pray for an end to racism and bigotry AND we are called to pray for those whose hearts are filled with hate and fear.

The drivers of killing trucks

The rage-filled cop-killers,

The terrified and bigoted police

The young white men carrying torches

Anyone who would wish harm against another child of God

I have to admit I am still trying to figure out how to do that. But, every night when I say the Lord’s Prayer I stop at the words, “Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on EARTH as it is in HEAVEN.”

I am reasonably sure there won’t be any racism in heaven, that the Canaanite woman will not be left out, and, before God’s throne one group is not going to be preferred over any other. I think that is the vision of the Kingdom Jesus has in mind when he says, “the kingdom of heaven is like . . .” And I, we, all of us together, need to keep working at it.

It is my prayer that God would make it so.

Thanks be to God