

Pentecost 11, Proper 15, August 20, 2017. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland WA
Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Isaiah 56:1,6-8; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15: 10-28

Great readings today! So rich and multi-layered! And with a great deal more contemporary relevance than you might think!

Isaiah says that just, ethical behavior by people of faith is the foundation of authentic community. That sort of community is so attractive, he continues, that all people of good will, no matter what their faith traditions, will be drawn to it. In fact, he continues, you should not wait passively for this to happen, your responsibility as part of the community of faith is to go out actively, to gather the outcasts not just of Israel but of all peoples – only then can we justly say that we are working to create “a house of prayer for all peoples.”

St. Paul's reflection is simply stating that since no one is free from imperfection, from sinfulness, then we have a responsibility to abandon a self-righteous attitude about our own faith and, in the face of God's generous inclusive grace, to seek to welcome and include all people, especially those we see standing against the values we hold dear. Inclusion, Paul says, means everyone!

And then there's Matthew! Two parts to this reading – and they're bound together by food! In fact food is absolutely central to understanding what's going on here, especially in the story of the Canaanite woman.

The first part of the reading is about what Jesus believed should be one of the principal markers of identity for people of faith: your actions toward others, not mechanical purity behavior. Don't base your core principles, your personal ethics, on purity laws, he was saying, such as the regulations around what to eat and what not to eat. That way's an easy “out.” Your core principles and personal ethics should be reflected in what you say and what you do – or, to put it the other way around, what you say and do is and always should be reflective of your core principles and personal ethics. Words – and the fruit they bear – can heal or hurt, unite or divide, embrace or condemn – as can any other behaviors that can “come out” of us.

The second part of that reading brings us up short, because Jesus seems to contradict himself! Again, food plays a role. And it looks like what Jesus says is expressing core principles that we'd never attribute to Jesus! These sound like the words of a bigot! A woman whose daughter is “possessed by a demon” – a tragic, destructive illness that - elsewhere - Jesus is quick to address – comes to Jesus for help and he basically tells her to “get lost.” At least, that's what it seems – but (rather like an iceberg) 90% of what's happening here is below the surface.

First, this is a story that first shows up in Mark's Gospel. There, though, the woman is called “Syrophoenician” – which is the Roman provincial name for the coastal plain that historically was a part of Canaan. Matthew chose “Canaanite” as the adjective describing the woman in this story – which is a very odd choice! It would be like calling a contemporary German a “Vandal” - the name for the tribe that sacked Rome in 455 A.D., or calling most of you “colonists!” “Canaanite” hadn't been in common usage for centuries. For any Jew of Jesus' time that name would have conjured up memories of ancient Jewish history.

The obvious question is “which part of ancient history?” And for Jesus’ contemporaries, the obvious answer was the entry into the promised land, as recorded in Deuteronomy and Joshua. In the early chapters of Deuteronomy the Chosen People were standing on the edge of the Promised Land and receiving “final instructions.” In particular they were commanded to “*show no mercy*,” to kill everything they would find there – human, animal, plant – to purify the land. Why? Because the inhabitants were considered to be so evil that there was no redeeming them - or anything they touched or used. It was to be ethnic cleansing on steroids. The name of the people who were? Canaanites! The Book of Joshua spells out the consequences of that command. Historians refer to it as “The Canaanite Genocide.” Matthew called this woman “Canaanite” to make that connection. If you think that Judean Jews of Jesus’ time despised the Samaritans, that’s nothing compared to their attitude toward the Canaanites. Not all Gentiles, not all foreigners, were the same; some were considered good. But Canaanites were, for the Jews, the worst sort of Gentile. Jesus, Matthew says, is dealing with the worst sort of Gentile, the worst sort of foreigner.

Secondly, this double-story doesn’t stand alone in Matthew’s gospel – it’s bracketed by two other stories that tell us what Matthew sees here. Both the before and after stories are feeding stories – of the 5,000 and the 4,000. At the “before” feeding everyone was Jewish, and 12 baskets are left over. It’s easy to see that as an allusion to the 12 Tribes of Israel. But at the second feeding everyone was a Gentile – everyone was a foreigner – and there were 7 baskets left over. 7 is, in Jewish numerology, the number of completeness, and especially the completeness, the wholeness of all creation (think the 1st Creation Story).....*and* the number of Canaanite peoples Deuteronomy identified as to be exterminated was – 7! So the number 7 encompassed all Canaanites.

Matthew was reminding his readers of the narrow view of salvation present in much of Judaism AND he was saying that the Good News of Jesus Christ was going to overturn that narrow view. Salvation was not limited to Judaism; Salvation was not limited to some of “the Nations;” salvation was to be shared with all, and expressly with those evil Canaanites. Here, with the story of the Canaanite Woman Matthew says, is the beginning of the healing of God’s creation.

The two feeding stories spoke of Jesus’ ability to provide ample bread. And here’s bread again, this time as a metaphor for the healing this woman longs for so much for her daughter. And she says something that underscores for Matthew the pivotal moment we’re sharing in: “*Have mercy on me, Lord.*” Remember what Deuteronomy said about Canaanites? “*Show no mercy.*” Here, in a small way, Jesus is being invited to begin the reversal of the Canaanite Genocide, to offer a sign of recognition and reconciliation. The Canaanite Woman pushes through his cheap shot about her ancestry with self-deprecating humor, and the Jesus we know – the person of compassion and mercy and love – steps forward with real warmth and gives her what she has asked for. The mending of the human breach is under way, the healing of creation has begun. Here, in this exchange, Jesus and the Canaanite Woman together model how to begin the reversal of history’s arc away from the violence of the Canaanite Genocide and toward the peaceful, loving, compassionate, merciful way that the cross and the resurrection proclaim so loudly.

This is good news for us, who are, after all, descendants of the Canaanite Woman – Gentiles – we should thank God for her persistence and whit!

Perhaps more importantly, this exchange is informative for us in the face of the sort of radical hatred we're seeing in our world today – most recently in Barcelona and in Charlottesville. Together, the Canaanite Woman and Jesus proclaim that no one truly stands outside of God's love, no matter how much hatred is present in their lives. As Nelson Mandela said: ***“No one is born hating another person because of the color of [their] skin or [their] background or [their] religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love... For love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”***

No one stands outside of God's love, no one stands outside the possibility of inclusion, of sharing in the bread of life...unless they exclude themselves – no one, not even neo-Nazis, or White Supremacists; not even an equivocating President; not even us.

Deuteronomy objectified an entire cultural group – Canaanites – so that they could be first dismissed then exterminated. Down the centuries that is a standard human pattern – first you make your foe less than human, then you seek to destroy them. Neo-Nazis and White Supremacists are simply the latest evil iteration of that very human behavior. We are called to challenge and disavow such behavior.

But the hardest task isn't disavowing Nazism or White Supremacy – that's fairly easy and straight-forward (for most of us, at least). The hardest task isn't standing in solidarity with the victims of their hate – that's harder than condemning their tormenters certainly, but still not the hardest task. The racism that was so evident in the events in Charlottesville will only get worse unless all people of good will come together and work to stop it now. That's always a part of what it means to be a Christian community. But that's not the hardest task. The hardest task is seeing Neo-Nazis and White Supremacists as fully human yet deeply wounded – people who must not only be challenged for what they believe in but helped for what they have become. That surely is what Jesus meant when he talked about loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute.

In the earliest written versions of the four Gospels – written in Greek – the name of our Savior is “Jesus.” That's a translation from the Hebrew. The Hebrew word that “Jesus” translates is “Joshua.” Just as St. Paul argues that the first Adam's sin is undone by Jesus, who he calls the “second Adam;” so also the first Joshua's objectifying, dehumanizing sin that led to all of the death and destruction that followed – the sin of racism – is undone, Matthew says – or, at least, has begun to be undone – by the 2nd Joshua – Jesus....and the Canaanite Woman, who, in the moment of their reconciliation, promise the possibility of the healing of the nations.

It's up to us to continue the work they begun.