

Proper 18 Year B 2012

“Then looking up to heaven he sighed and said to him be opened.”

I have something of a confession to make. I remember three different people with whom I went to grade school...Mary Miller, Paul Lee Phillips and Charles Finney...what they all had in common was that they were all torturously ostracized from the rest of us, because we, their classmates, unmercifully ridiculed them just because they were “different.” Poor Mary was just plain unattractive, she was ugly, and had a skin condition. On the playground we would touch her, and then run around among our classmates touching them and yelling out “Mary Miller germs”...and then there was Paul Lee Phillips, a student, as my mother put it, who lived out in the county. He had a wandering eye and the thickest south Alabama, Houston County accent one could imagine; he talked slowly, but you still had trouble understanding him...and he was slow academically...we would imitate his accent and call him dumb...even my teacher Ms. Stuckey was complicit in the bullying...and then there was Charles Finney whose almost translucent pale skin made him look as if he had never been outside during the day, he could hardly run, he was so weak, and would at P.E. get ridiculed by his classmates and the coaches...he kept to himself in languid solitude...perhaps simply to avoid as much as possible the malicious teasing he got from the rest of us.

I have no idea what happened to these people, but I do know that I wish I could take back the wounding things I said to them...Our blood brothers and sister, children of God, who never chose who they were...but they were rendered shamed and voiceless...Was it something inside of us that we abhorred or feared that caused us to project such vitriol on these the weak and marginalized among us...I don't know, but I bitterly rue those days. And this all happened before so-called integration when Black students and white students would go to school together...God only knows what these African American children endured on the school playgrounds across America...how many of them were rendered shamed and voiceless.

The word xenophobia means fear of the stranger, fear of the other. Anthropologists hypothesize that this is an ancient imprint in our DNA that “helped” us millennia ago when we humans were tribal...to fear another tribe meant protection and preservation for one's own tribe...but this poison is still with us...we fight wars for fear of the other...we call entire nations evil for fear of misplaying the geo-political game whose prize is power...this same poison is what engenders homophobia...It is the same poison that

would denigrate women...It is the same poison that continues the attitudes and practice of racism...Let's not fool ourselves about that one...Racism in this country is not as blatant as it once was, but it is certainly still around and powerful, and often in silent and insidious ways, which may be more dangerous than it was when it was right before our face...It exists in our city, our state and our nation and our world, and I imagine we're all guilty of it in some way...and brothers and sisters it has no place in God's created order...Our God who commands us to welcome the stranger, to take care of the weak, to love even our enemies...that in God's commonweal there are neither Jew nor Greek, male or female, slave nor free... a high metaphor for the truth that all are included in the redeeming love of God...In God's commonweal there are no outcasts...Since we are in the political season my hope for this country, whoever is elected...my hope is that our nation will convert from being super power to super servant...I believe that is our call as a people, a call for all people...to heal their sick, befriend the lonely, raise up the oppressed, dignify the abased, bear justice and mercy and peace instead of violence, share the wealth...without regard to borders or boundaries between countries forged by violence...surely God is blind to such man made illusions.

This manner of thinking, this radically inclusive manner of life requires conversion, a visceral turning towards the good, and that is a lifelong process, and it takes work and consciousness... In our Gospel reading today, Jesus models such a conversion, he too with the same xenophobic crimp in his DNA just like us...he's human...He calls the Syro-Phoenician woman a dog...a racial slur to be sure...but the woman persists, she musters her personhood, her chutzpa, and calls Jesus out...and Jesus turns to her and tells her that her daughter, because of her found voice, has been healed...we're not told how she was so empowered, but I suspect that it was her belief, her trust that at God's heart, God is good...and sometimes we must demand such goodness of our God among us.

Jesus then moves on at light speed, this is Mark's gospel after all, all the way from the northwest of Israel on the coast...all the way over to the southeast side of Galilee called the Decapolis, where he heals a man who is a deaf mute...both of these locations, Tyre and the Decapolis, are gentile country...the land of strangers, the land of the other, the land of the different... out of Jesus' and hence Israel's comfort zone, Jesus a symbol of Israel...and so there is a second conversion going on here...Jesus comes to the awareness, and of course this is a story of the Marken community being converted as well, as did Paul convert...that this life of faith, this way of Jesus...this way of mercy and compassion and welcome and peace is for

all...the clean and the unclean, the ins and the outs, the normal and the different... Jesus is for the world entire, just as Israel throughout its lore is chosen by God to share God's self giving to all the nationsIn our world that means that all participate in God's abundance and favor...black and white, the Latino immigrant seeking documentation...the homeless addicts walking our streets.....The Jews, the Muslims of our world...the Buddhists, the Sikhs...the Hindu...all faiths and ethnicities...we are all, as the collect in the daily office puts it, of one blood.....we are all a people of one blood... therefore we are responsible for each other, no matter what...because blood is thicker than water...it runs deep....deep in the heart of God.

This so called xenophobic crimp in our DNA is learned....we weren't meant to be that way.....the crimp has been bred into us through a collective fearful memory of violence over the ages...and we must consciously stand against it...we must trust God's goodness in all people...and to trust that is to live in a manner of freedom that casts out all fear...Hebrew scripture cries out for this, our conversion...the New testament and the Epistles cry out for this, our conversion...Jesus models it for us, practicing a predisposition of openness to the truth...that is his godlikeness....that's in our DNA also.... our godlikeness which will heal our fear, heal our vestige of genetic code that still harbors the knee jerk response of fight or flight.

We dear people of God are God's gracious gifts to our world....we are to be opened to the hurt of our world, empowering the dispossessed, giving voice to the voiceless....let us own our baptismal vocation for the sake of this world, a world not of strangers, but a world of fecund diversity and cultural and ethnic beauty, a world full of the potential and capability of transforming and familial love...let us own our being chosen as gifts, gifts of love incarnate...love for all...and that includes Mary, and Paul Lee and Charles.