

Pent15_Prop18B_090615_mcr
All Saints Episcopal Church

"Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin."

In the name of God, who is above us, within us and beside us. Amen.

Good morning. The first half of today's gospel lesson is a shocking one, even if you have read it before. We Christians, most of us, have lived our lives with the image of a 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild' - except maybe for the time he turns over the tables in the Temple, and that's acceptable since it is 'righteous' anger - but here is a side of Jesus that brings us up short.

Let's remind ourselves of what Jesus has been doing in our readings during the summer. Mark, as we know, tells his Gospel story with great haste and with little embellishment; Jesus has been all over the map, visiting towns and villages and developing a large following and a reputation that precedes him. The Kingdom of God has been breaking into the world in the least likely of places, like howling demoniacs, bleeding women and dead little girls. Jesus has taken the abuse of his hometown folks, who question his capability and authority to do anything other than build cabinets. He has suffered the brutal murder of his friend and cousin John, fed thousands of people who won't let him have any rest, and made a unpopular policy statement in yet another argument with the Pharisees about what is clean and what is unclean. He is tired. Worn out.

So he decides to get away. This time, he decides to leave familiar territory. Maybe a trip to the beach would enable him to get some peace and quiet! He heads over to the Gulf Shores of Israel - Tyre - on the coast - in Gentile territory. And he gets a little beach cottage so no one will know he is there.

But darned if a woman doesn't find out immediately that he is there, and she comes to ask him to heal her daughter who is possessed with an unclean spirit. Now, here is where Mark gives us some important details: the woman bows down, in the posture of respect and worship, to make her request; and she is a Gentile - from Syria. Not a Canaanite, or a Samaritan, or even a Roman - the kind of 'others' with whom he had more frequent contact, at least according to the biblical stories we know. No, this woman was definitely foreign to him. AND, of course, she was also a woman.

And what does Jesus do? He snaps at her. He insults her, calling her a dog - and he does NOT mean a cute little puppy! He might as well have slapped her across the face, which is what it feels like to me when we read this.

What is happening here? Jesus has been helping EVERYONE who comes to him! Why has he suddenly changed his mind? (Now some commentators try to turn this into something not so harsh, by saying that maybe Jesus did it to test the woman's faith, or that maybe he acted this way as an object lesson for his disciples. I think Jesus' reaction came from somewhere deep within him, surfacing from the ancient prejudices of a people trying to protect their tribe from the potential danger of other tribes that would capture and subdue them. It was a moment when Jesus, who was as much human as he was divine, had not yet realized the truly radical nature of God's kingdom.)

Despite the insult, the woman does not back down. She does not accept the label that Jesus puts on her. She is quick, and clever, and wins Jesus over with her reply that "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." In short, this woman enables Jesus to change his mind about what he said, which might have surprised even him. Her reply says something about the incredible generosity of God that even the crumbs from the table are more than enough for all of God's children. The woman's love for her child, which is at the heart of God's own love for us, touches Jesus' heart, moves it in new directions, and opens up his mind.

That Jesus continues to heal and feed more people, following this chapter, is evidence that in Jesus' heart and mind, like all foods - all people are clean as well. So why are we in our city, our state, our country, in our one human family, still arguing about who's included, who's acceptable?

The news is full of stories right now about who is included and who is not: politicians jockey to get their lists of who should be excluded just right, so that voters will like them the best and they can be tops in the polls; a government worker says that 'God's law' (as interpreted by her) outranks the law of the land, and therefore, she can exclude in her work, people she thinks should be excluded because of who they are; people who disagree with this government worker have taken to publicly insulting her looks, her clothes, her hair, and the state where she lives - all of which, for some reason, are 'proof' to them of her inferiority and her injustice; Hungary is building a 13-ft high, 110-mile long barbed-wire wall to stop the flow of migrants across its territory, while thousands are losing their lives in the perilous escape from the countries that persecute them; and with the current pervasiveness in this country of a shocking disregard for

treating non-white people with dignity and respect, we seem to have stepped back in time 50 years and more, where a movement like "Black Lives Matter" has become demonized as a hateful anti-white faction, instead of being the focus on civil rights that it is meant to be.

Today, September 6, the congregations of the Episcopal Church are being called by the Presiding Bishop and the President of the House of Deputies to participate in "Confession, Repentance, and Commitment to End Racism Sunday"; we have been asked by the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church (the denomination of the church in Charleston, SC, where 9 members were murdered by a white racist in June) to join them in this ecumenical effort with prayer and action. AME Bishop Reginald T. Jackson writes, "Racism will not end with the passage of legislation alone; it will also require a change of heart and thinking. This is an effort which the faith community must lead, and be the conscience of the nation."

Our regular Confession today has been changed to reflect our participation in this call. And it is hoped that we will "make a commitment to end racism by the example of our lives and actions." To make this commitment happen, we need to take a difficult, perhaps painful, look into our own hearts. In a sermon called, "Owning Your Own Shadow," Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor writes that Jesus knows the truth about us and our judgments about one another, especially when we draw a line and put some of God's children on the other side of it. She observes that "the danger" is within *us*, not *out there*, in 'others' who are unlike us: "There is actual evil in the world, no doubt about it," she says, "but until we meet up with the evil in ourselves, we cannot do battle. We cannot fight the shadow we will not own." (*Bread of Angels*)

Those of you who watched the video of Presiding Bishop-elect Michael Curry's sermon at the Jonathan Daniels Pilgrimage may remember his example of "Lucy," a skeleton found in Ethiopia who is described as our first human ancestor. Lucy is the link; the origin of all DNA is traceable back to Africa. So - much more than just a nice slogan, the 'one human family' is a reality.

It is because we are all one family that we say every week that all people are invited to receive communion at God's table. It's why we don't exclude those who are another color, those who are divorced, those who are gay, or who speak a different language, or who think differently or believe differently. We have all been created by the one God; all of us are sisters and brothers, children loved by God. In the third verse of Hymn 603 we just sang:

*"Where generation, class, or race divide us to our shame,
he sees not labels but a face, a person, and a name."*

The two most repeated phrases in the Bible are 'FEAR NOT' and 'REMEMBER.' If any...faith leaders [are] fear mongering, telling [us] to build walls instead of tearing them down, instead of scaling them to feed hungry people, encouraging any sort of us vs. them mentality... THINK HARD. The Gospel says: Do not be afraid. Re-member. Re-member is the opposite of dis-member. When we shut our doors to our own family, when we are afraid of each other - we are dismembered. The kingdom of God comes when we treat each other like KIN. Like family. When we RE-MEMBER. (Momastery blog)

Will our own hearts and minds, then, be opened up to see faces, persons and names, and share God's abundant, overflowing grace and love for the whole human family? Please, God, let it be so!