

“The Ability To See From A Different Perspective”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

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Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Readings from Scripture: Romans 11:1-2, 29-32 and Matthew 15:10-28

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel?

for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

Romans 11:1-2, 29-32

Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, ‘Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.’ Then the disciples approached and said to him, ‘Do you know that the Pharisees took offence when they heard what you said?’ He answered, ‘Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.’ But Peter said to him, ‘Explain this parable to us.’ Then he said, ‘Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.’

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, ‘Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.’ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, ‘Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.’ He answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ But she came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’ He answered, ‘It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ She said, ‘Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.’ Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.

Matthew 15:10-28

Will you pray with me? Holy God you send us your Word. Sometimes it is to comfort, sometimes it is to challenge. It is always to learn to grow. So be with us today as we wrestle with your Word for us. Amen.

As David shared last Sunday, he and I both wrestled with how to lead worship following the recent events in Charlottesville. The images were haunting and they were painful and they were difficult. I took real comfort in David's statement that sometimes our gut response may not be the most helpful. That sometimes sitting and reflecting allows us to process our thoughts and feelings before we respond, and to better understand where they come from. Harder still is to acknowledge that there is no easy fix or quick fix to this. Yet there cannot be silence either. We can not move forward and act as if this was a random incident because it wasn't.

Now there are those who say this is all because of our loss of faith and in turn our moral compass. There are others who say it is the end times, but maybe we are too quick to say, "Well, Jesus is the answer." Our nation's churches were strong and prevalent during times of great turmoil in our nation's past. Hitler used the Christian faith as a tool in his call to nationalism and he brought anti-Semitism to a fever pitch. He even tried to take over the leadership of the German church, which is why we have the Barmen Declaration that declares that Jesus Christ alone is Lord of the church. But maybe Jesus is not the answer in the way of simply stating, "Believe and you will be saved and all will be well." Maybe instead it is Jesus who raises the questions: "How do we live out our faith in times such as these and work to welcome everyone? To honor everyone? How do we live in ways that ensure that love and life will triumph over death and darkness?"

So consider this morning's Gospel reading. It begins with Jesus stating that what we say matters. That what comes out of our mouths reflects what is in our hearts. And that is a sermon in and of itself and you're only getting one today. So maybe in three years when the cycle comes around, that is a powerful, powerful point to focus on. But after this passage, Jesus moves on both in topic and place. And he and his disciples end up in some pagan cities called Sidon and Tyre, and while he's speaking there a Canaanite woman approaches him. She asks him to heal her daughter and she tells him she is possessed by a demon. But what happens next is startling because Jesus doesn't respond. He appears to ignore her. Now that might be a common response for a people that look down on the pagan Canaanite, but this is Jesus. It feels so out of character. After all, Jesus is the one who tells the story of the compassion of the Samaritan who cares for the injured stranger. He speaks to the tax collectors. He runs around with those considered untouchable, and he allows the unclean woman to anoint him with oil.

Now, the first question we might ask is why is he even in these cities of those who worship pagan Gods. Most of Jesus' ministry was in Galilee among his people. But today, we learned he's moved on. So why would that be? There are scholars who point out that things had become very tense in Galilee. He was being mobbed by crowds and they wanted him to become king, and they were attempting to anoint him. So it is because things had become so intense he needed to get out of there and went in another direction, of all places, cities where people worship pagan gods? But why go there when he'll encounter people that are different and then ignore them? There are some possible theories. One is that Jesus was trying to teach the disciples something in particular, because their first reaction was to tell them to send her away. After all, she's been bugging them, too. And we've seen this before. Remember, the disciples reacted that way when some people brought children to him, or when thousands were on the hillside and it was meal time and they were panicking. They were not happy. They wanted Jesus to send them on their way and to move on.

But then, you think, "Wait a minute, the disciples know the story of the Good Samaritan. They were with the foreign woman at the well." So could it be that Jesus was still challenging them to grow, to consider what was happening? They are human after all. They are rooted in a faith, a world of the clean and the unclean, the kosher and the non-kosher. It's not easy to change one's world view completely overnight. As they traveled with him, surely they were evolving and learning new ways of living out their faith. Maybe Jesus is using this as a teachable moment to help them to grow a new understanding. But he said, "I only came for the lost sheep of Israel." So what does this whole thing say to us? Maybe more than we'd like to admit. We treasure our faith. But is faith an object or a way of living? As I've said before, faith is a verb. It's supposed to grow. It's not supposed to stand still. Maybe as he tries to teach them, we are reminded that we are to grow and to evolve in new understandings and insights, that we are going to be challenged by faith to see things in new ways. Or is Jesus who is being challenged at that moment to widen the doorway of faith to include others? Did he first view his role to be only among his people, or did he have a wider worldview?

Being human means we change. Jesus was human. Does it make us uncomfortable to think that Jesus would evolve? Was he really set in one worldview from day one, or did he begin to see some new things, that God was calling him to bring all people into the fold and not just those he called "my people"? So in this story, are different people then playing roles to signify things? Are the disciples reflecting the traditional views of the Pharisees with literal interpretations of the law, or was it the loving and desperate mother who opened Jesus' heart and convinced him to change his mind? Is his silence a way to see how the disciples will react? That would be the most comfortable way to look at it, but we really don't know. What we do know is that Jesus finally responds. He turns to her and speaks to her words of hope and healing. He has compassion on her and he reaches across the divide between us and them and makes her a we. And then, he says, "Great is your faith. It will be done as you asked."

Now, there are scholars who express concerns about what we might do with that statement about her great faith. They don't want us to think that maybe this woman suddenly has so much faith and that's what does changes everything, and that if we all believed enough in something, then we would have it happen, too. Maybe his word directs us to no longer see her as a Canaanite pagan and a lesser person, but that she, too, is a child of the faith, for she is a child of God. She was willing to reach out. She was willing to trust. She was willing to be in conversation with someone so different from her. She is no longer *one of them*. She is an *us*. And if we're honest, we know that us and them is so much a part of the way of our lives. Genesis is the focus for this lectionary season and we have heard how us and them permeates the stories of Jacob and Esau, Isaac and Ishmael, Sarah and Hagar and Joseph and his brothers. And certainly, it continues throughout time, the Shias and the Sunnis, the tribes in the Sudan. And if you think we in America aren't tribal, go to a Cubs and Cardinals game. Now, that's a tribal issue.

All joking aside, there are often these tensions between us and them, and it is hard for us to see it as we. But in the stories in Genesis, we see that many of them involve reconciliation. Isaac and Ishmael stand together at their father's grave. Esau reconciles with Jacob. And this morning's reading is about Joseph reconciling with his brothers from across the years and the miles. Perhaps the response of Jesus to the Canaanite woman is one as well. The stories of coming together and teaching us about the lessons learned and wisdom gained and the reminder that when love and compassion are present, healing begins. A reminder that those who come from different perspectives may have a lot to teach us. That compassion has power. For compassion is the ability to see others as connected rather than separated, a way to build bridges instead of fences.

A week and a half ago at a Deacons meeting, we heard a story of the power of compassion to change lives. It was the story from a young man from Rwanda. From his facebook page it begins thusly, "My name is Bertrand, I live in Kigali and I am 23 years old. My life has been a bumpy ride. I know what it is to be hungry because there is not enough food for eight brothers. And not being able to go to school because there is not enough money to pay the school fee. I was lucky enough to find people who have helped me along the way. Now, I wanna help those who need it, I want to give back to the community and....make Rwanda a better place." Bertrand was born just after his parents returned to their hometown after the cease fire following the great massacres in 1994. One deacon calculated 10,000 people were killed each day. In three months, 1,000,000 people died as a result of tribal warfare. His family returned to their hometown with nothing and pretty much lived on the streets. As he grew up he said he had two dreams then...one was to graduate from the best high school in the area and one day to own a suit.

One evening as he went to restaurants to pick up discarded food for their chickens, he ran into a man from Britain. He talked with him. The man gave him some bananas to eat and some money. They ran into one another again about two weeks later and began to talk more about his schooling. The man made it possible for him to go to high school. When the man was to be married he bought Bertrand his first suit. This stranger gave Bertrand hope. While the man moved to another country for his work, the impact of his actions did not stop there. Bertrand discovered painting and began to be paid for his paintings and shared what he earned with those in need around him. He finally finished high school and dreamed of college. But he realized that there were still many children on the streets living like he once had and like the man from Britain he had compassion on them. He began using some of his money to educate them. Then he noticed that the single mothers of these children had no means of support and started a program for them to sew clothing. Then a woman from Spain came to Kigali and learned of his program. She helped him create a video and start a foundation. Recently he was able to come to the US and sell his paintings at a gallery run by one of our members. Bertrand leaves for Africa today and our prayers go with him....but it could only happen because a British citizen, a woman from Spain, a chance to come to America..came together. His story is an example of how the boundaries of race, country, culture and tribe have been erased and new life is coming forth through the power of compassion.

If we think about it, boundaries in life are often imaginary. They separate us in our minds but not in reality. Statelines are often made by rivers but they certainly are not real lines. People who seem different are often more like us than we realize. If we approach people who are different from us, as a them and not as us, we lose out on the gifts they have to offer, the wisdom they might share. The things they can teach us and the compassion and love that can be shared.

That happened to me years ago. I sat and laughed with my girlfriends' grandma. Some of you read this story I posted on facebook. We were playing cards and Nana offered us some cookies and we said, "No nanna, we are dieting". And she leaned over and said, in a way only she could say, "Diet Schmiet" and she sat down the plate of Oreos--when I suddenly noticed a number tattooed on her arm – once I got over my shock I have never forgotten the fact that she was able to laugh, tease us and know joy...I was so deeply moved by her courage and joie de vivre. Too many Jewish people I know, or members of their families, have been faced with or have heard or lived with unspeakable memories that cannot be fathomed or thought of for too long without losing one's peace of mind...but hard as it is, maybe that's an important thing....as Elie Wiesel said "we remember so we do not forget...". Indeed may we never forget the horror of the Holocaust and no less the horrors of slavery too...In remembering we also can learn from the past. And it may mean stepping out of our comfort zone, moving into unfamiliar territory. And we are. But as people of faith we are called to

take risks, take on new challenges and get involved in new things, even things that may make us uncomfortable. Being uncomfortable can also help us to grow and to see things in new ways.

I know in this unsettling time that is not easy. We are anxious and wonder how to bring about peace and healing. Perhaps it can come when we are willing to walk in the path of compassion and open minds. To sense “the other” as part of “us.” There are times when it is literally as simple as smiling at someone we do not know as we pass them on the street. The ability to see what we have in common is so much a part of what Jesus wanted us to learn and understand. It is what allows us to bridge the divide, to heal the rifts, to create hope and to heal parts of this broken and fragile world.