

Lutheran Church of the Epiphany, Hempstead, New York
Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York
Marianne K. Tomecek, Interim Pastor

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost ~ Proper 15A – August 16, 2020

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

Romans 1-2a, 29-32

Psalm 67

Matthew 15:21-28

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. C: AMEN

The late author and Christian theologian “C.S. Lewis once wrote an essay entitled ‘The Inner Ring.’ He says in the article that in any playground or office or church there are little groups or rings of people who are on the "inside." And [then there are] those who aren't: those who don't get picked at playtime, those who ... [sit by themselves] in the lunchroom. Lewis says that the existence of such rings is not necessarily bad. We're finite beings, and we can only have deeply intimate friendships with a limited number of people. But he says that the desire to gain status or self-worth by being part of an "inner ring" is deeply destructive. It causes you to constantly compare yourself with others, to feel anguish when you're left out, and deeper anguish when someone close to you gets let in. Worst of all, once you're in, you want to keep others out, because it's the exclusive nature of the group that makes you feel good.

“Jesus' disciples wrestled often with that desire to be part of the inner ring. They argued over who should have the seats closest to Jesus. They asked Jesus to bring down fire on pagan villages. They rebuked little children for coming in too close and wasting Jesus' time. Jesus must have often shaken his head because he was constantly teaching about who was in and who was out, about God's desire to bring into the inner ring of his love anyone who will come. One of the most intriguing stories about status is ... [the] one ... [we have as our gospel text today].” (Tucker, John, “Breaking Down Barriers: Inclusion,” <http://www.Sermons.com>, Sermons for Proper 15, August 16, 2020.

Once again, we are on the road with Jesus and his disciples. They traveled from Gennesaret, on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee, north and west toward the Mediterranean Sea, to the district of Tyre and Sidon. It was Gentile territory.

We don't know what brought them there, or if they actually crossed over the border and entered the territory, because being there would have made them ritually impure. But assuming that they were in the district, we hear about another person who has come to Jesus for help.

She's described by Matthew as "a Canaanite woman" who "started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.'" (MT 15:22.) And we have an account of Jesus that isn't very complimentary. First, he ignores her plea. But she keeps shouting and his disciples are annoyed by her. "'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.' Jesus answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'" (MT 15:23-24.)

We don't know how he knows that this woman is not an Israelite. Maybe her clothing; maybe her accent; there were Israelites living in the district. But Matthew's term for her refers to a nationality that had not been in existence for fifteen hundred years – not since Moses' time. It would be like referring today to a contemporary person as "a Pilgrim woman." But it did identify her as someone not of one of the tribes of Israel, and an outsider to Jesus, who understood his mission from God to be to minister only to them.

But how curious, she addresses him as "Lord, Son of David," acknowledging his ancestry, using the messianic title, and appearing to be the insider that she isn't. Then she kneels down before him, showing her subservience and asks again for his help. And he denies her again, this time not with what we might call "the microaggression" of ignoring her presence, but actually using the racial slur, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." (MT 15:25-26.)

This is not the Jesus of our Sunday School days, meek and mild, loving everyone, is it? But it is the Jesus who is fully human. He's committed to doing only what he thinks he's been called to do, and he insults the woman in need to try to get rid of her.

But she's ready to demand justice and she says, in essence, "Canaanite lives matter!" She accepts his insult in calling her a dog, but goes him one better: I'm not asking you take food from your children; just let me, like the dogs under your tables, to take the crumbs that fall for my precious daughter's healing. (MT 15:27.) The practice of verbal sparring in Jesus' culture was very important. It was how people maintained their social status and if you were insulted, you had to respond with a retort, or your whole family would be shamed.

She does that and she breaks through his hardness. Maybe the human Jesus was reined in by the divine Christ. It may be that she called him to remember that Jesus had told the Pharisees and his disciples not too long before when they were in Gennesaret, that what mattered to God wasn't what went into someone's mouth, but what came out of it; that was what showed what was in someone's heart. (MT 15:11, 17-18.)

The power of her response, expressing her faith, led Jesus to say, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly, even at a distance, and without even having to speak to her or to touch her. (MT 15:28.) This event was a turning point in Jesus’ ministry in Matthew. It expanded to include the Gentiles to the point that, at the end of the Gospel, Jesus . She spoke the truth in love to him and – incidentally – the disciples learned another lesson: this one about how we draw the edges of the circles of insiders and outsiders. Sometimes people move from outside to inside, and *vice versa*. In the end, who she or her ancestors were, or where they were from, no longer mattered.

This about-face by the Son of God was in the divine tradition. God had done a similar thing 500 years before. When the people of Israel were sent from exile in Babylon back to Jerusalem under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and to repopulate Judah, God spoke. We heard it in the reading of Isaiah this morning, from the third portion of that lengthy presentation of the word of God, the new thing God was doing for the people who had returned to Jerusalem from exile. Then, in order to restore the people to regular worship of YHWH and to increase the number of the chosen people in the restored “promised land,” eunuchs and foreigners who had been prohibited by God in Deuteronomy (chapter 23) from participating in temple worship would be permitted to join the assembly. God was doing a new thing.

So, God did a new thing in Jerusalem in the sixth Century BC, and God did it again in the first Century AD in Tyre and Sidon; and God has continued doing a new thing again and again and again. But the new things God continues to do have one, age-old purpose: to do justice.

God calls us to demand that justice be done. We are to examine the biases of our society and of our own selves in order to dismantle the social system that exists based on religious, economic, social, cultural, political, ethnic, and sexual biases. That is what is happening in our country today. The demonstrations for Black lives to be treated equally with so-called “white” ones; the call to stop police violence when their mission is to serve and protect; the insistence that respect be granted to people of all faiths and of every location on the sexual spectrum all are part of today’s “new thing” that God is doing.

We need the persistence and faith of the Canaanite woman to carry out this mission toward justice. We need the strength, energy and commitment of the people of Jerusalem in the sixth Century BC to reform society. But all of those characteristics are gifts of God, so we are equipped to do so. If we are feeling that God has forgotten

us because of the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic and the violence of governmental leaders, we can recall that God has given us the ability to overcome anything by being obedient to God. We have the knowledge to stop the disease if we just follow the scientists' directions. We have the experience of past caring leadership to demand that our leaders protect people and provide for their growth; give them lives of safety and security. For, as Paul told the Romans, God works in and through us so that God "may be merciful to all." (Romans 11:32.) We don't need to be concerned with insiders and outsiders. We all are inside God's loving Spirit.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. **C: AMEN**