

## **Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost Aug 20, 2017**

**In today's gospel, Matthew describes one of those difficult moments in Jesus' life that we might skip altogether if the lectionary did not direct us to deal with it. What makes it so difficult is how harsh Jesus sounds, how harsh and downright rude. First he refuses to answer a woman pleading for his help, then he denies that he has anything to offer "her kind," and finally he likens her to a dog before the sheer force of her faith changes something in him and he decides to answer her prayer after all.**

**The problem is that she is a Canaanite, one of the great unwashed with whom observant Jews of Jesus' time had little contact. She comes from the coastal region of Syria, where strange Gods are worshiped and ritual laws of cleanliness are unknown. She is a Gentile, in other words, which is the biblical term for everyone who is not a Jew, and as such she is both an outsider and untouchable.**

**Earlier in the Tenth chapter of Matthew, it is Jesus himself who warns his disciples to steer clear of Gentiles, reminding them that they have been sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. The only catch is that the lost sheep do**

not seem to want to found. In spite of Jesus' undivided attention to them, they are not rushing to respond to his shepherd's call

In today's story he has just come from Nazareth, his hometown, where his friends and family have doubted his authority and taken offense at his teaching. He has recently received word that John the Baptist has lost his head to a dancing girl, and he had tried at this blow to withdraw from the crowds for a while, but the crowds have followed him, and he has, with five loaves and two fish, fed them all. Then there was the storm at sea and Peter's wish to cross the water, ruined by Peter's fear and doubt. Everywhere Jesus turns he finds need - need and people who want what he can do for them but who remain blind to who he is. He is at the frayed end of his rope, and all but used up.

Then comes this Canaanite woman crying out to him to heal her daughter---one more of the needy multitudes who want something from him--only this one does a shocking thing: She calls him by name "O Lord Son of David." It is the title reserved for the Messiah, the title his own people have withheld from him. When this woman addresses him as the Son of David, she names something in him that even his own disciples have failed

to recognize, and it must seem like a mean trick of fate to him to hear what he most wants to hear coming from the mouth of someone he least wants to hear it from.

*surely*  
~~surely~~ So he does not answer her a word. He draws the line ~~surely~~ as if he had leaned down and traced it in the dust at his feet. Enough is enough. He will go no further. The bank is closed. The doctor is out. The sign on the door says "Closed for business." So what if she called him by name? He will not waste his energy on this Gentile woman while his own people go wanting. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," he says to the woman and that is supposed to be that.

But the woman will not stay on her side of the line. Kneeling at his feet, she says, "Lord help me." Jesus has dismissed her but she will not be dismissed, she has gotten her foot in the door before Jesus can close it in her face, and she shows no sign of leaving before he has dealt with her "Lord help me," she says, and I can only imagine that his blood pressure goes up. Can't she hear? He has told her no, told her that she is not his sheep, but she does not seem to have gotten the message so he says it again, louder and clearer than before. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

he says, a cruel rebuff if there ever was one.

Since Jesus was both divine and human it seems fair to guess what might have been going on with him. He was discouraged and weary and a long way from home. Every time he turned around someone wanted something from him, but at the same time no one wanted what he most wanted to give - namely, himself, in terms of who he was for them and not only in terms of what he could do for them.

It is not hard to imagine how that feels, even if you do not happen to be the Messiah--to be surrounded by appetites, by people who want your time and <sup>YOUR</sup> gifts but who do not seem much interested in who you really are; to be confused about what you are supposed to do how much you are supposed to give, and to be worried about whether there is enough of you to go around.

You have to draw the line somewhere. How many times have <sup>we</sup> drawn <sup>it</sup> the line. We lose our tempers when outsiders try to cross it because they are challenging the limits we have placed on ourselves to protect ourselves. Strangers show up saying "Help me" and we invoke the line, the line that separates insiders from outsiders, clean from unclean, family from the wolves that howl outside

our doors. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" we say, or something to that effect. It sounds harsh, but what are you going to do? You have to draw the line somewhere.

But the Canaanite woman simply will not budge. Jesus all but claps his hands in the woman's face, but she does not blink. "Yes, Lord," she says when he calls her a dog, "yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table. When she says that, something in Jesus snaps. He blinks. His anger dissolves. Something in him is rearranged and changed forever, a change you can hear in his voice. "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish. And her daughter is healed instantly.

The line he had drawn between him and the woman disappears; the limits he had placed on himself vanish, and you can almost hear the huge wheel of history turning as Jesus comes to a new understanding of who he is and what he has been called to do. He is no longer a Messiah called only to the lost sheep of Israel, but God's chosen redeemer of the world, Jews and Gentiles alike, beginning with this Canaanite woman.

Through her faith he learns that God's purpose for him is bigger than he had imagined, that there is enough

of him to go around, and in that moment there is no going back to the limits he observed even a moment ago. The old boundaries will not contain his new vision; he must rub them out and draw them bigger, to include this foreign woman today and who knows what tomorrow. Answering God's call means that he can longer control his ministry or narrow his mission. There is no more safety or certainty for him, no more guarding against loss or hanging on to his cherished notions about the way things ought to be. Faith works like a lever on him, opening his arms wider and wider until there is room for the whole world in them, until he allows them to be nailed open on the cross.

Isn't that the way it goes? Over and over God's call to us means pushing old boundaries, embracing outsiders, giving up the notion that there is not enough of us to go around. We may resist; we may even lose our tempers, but the call of God is insistent, as insistent as the Canaanite woman who would not leave Jesus alone. The call of God keeps after us, calling us by name, until finally we step over the lines we have drawn for ourselves and discover a whole new world on the other side.

**"Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you**

**as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.**

**Amen**

**Subject:** A letter from the rector on the events in Charlottesville  
**From:** St. John's Church (office@sjparish.net)  
**To:** walter41634@att.net;  
**Date:** Monday, August 14, 2017 12:56 PM



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Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I want to share a few words in the aftermath of the terror that took place in Charlottesville, VA this past weekend. Nothing can justify such hate mongering and racial violence by white supremacists and alt-right supporters, which resulted in the brutal injury of many and the tragic death of Heather Heyer. We cannot ignore the evil of racism. Hate, intolerance and bigotry diminish everyone, both the perpetrator and the victim. They have no place in a civil society that guarantees individual freedoms and values human decency.

Racism is a sin. It crushes the human soul and denies that we are all made in God's image. As Christians, we believe in a God of love; a God who forgives, redeems and restores all lives, no matter how broken or shattered. We are committed to striving for justice and peace among all people, and to respecting the dignity of every human being, no matter the cost. Jesus taught us to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and body, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. He also taught us that nothing can overcome the power of love. Love is the only tonic to cure the evil of racism.

As Christians, we know that love will prevail as we work together, with our brothers and sisters of all races, all faiths, to overcome the toxicity of hatred and bigotry. Together, we can become a living example of what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves. The Rt. Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde, Bishop of Washington, said it best, "We cannot expunge the sin of racism from our past and present, but we can redeem it. And we must."

At St. John's, in the months ahead, we will provide a safe place where we can come together to learn about racism and what we can do to help bring this shameful part of our nation's history to an end. In the meantime, please continue to pray for our nation, our national and local leaders, our community and ourselves. May we have the courage to work together for justice and truth, and be defined not by our differences, but by our love for one another.

Peace,

Susan+