

Sunday, August 20, 2017
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 15

Matthew 15.10-28

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This sermon comes with a warning label: I am about to say some things that may shock or offend you. I apologize for the offense, if you are offended; but I won't apologize for saying what I'm about to say. It is sometimes the role of the priest and the preacher to say what is shocking, to start a conversation that we might not want to have. I dare to say some of these things because many of you know me, and I hope you will give me the benefit of the doubt and listen to what I have to say. So I ask of you these things: To continue to listen, even if you are shocked or offended, rather than tuning me out. To think about what I am saying. And then, if you have comments or concerns or questions, to talk with me and/or Father Michael about them, rather than letting them simmer. I told Michael the gist of what I wanted to say, so he's not being taken unawares, and he and I are both prepared to continue this conversation inside and outside these walls.

Our collect this morning tells us that Christ is our example of Godly life, and that we are supposed to "receive thankfully the fruits of his redeeming work, and to follow daily in his footsteps." Well, where his footsteps lead this morning is somewhere that we might not choose to go, if we had the choice. The good news is, there's good news at the end of the Gospel story, and there is good news for us as well, if we choose to hear it. But to get there, we have to wade through some stuff. And it all has to do with what Jesus says and does in this morning's Gospel.

Jesus is probably about halfway through his time of ministry. He's been teaching and preaching and healing and dodging the traps of the Pharisees. He goes away from Galilee and into Tyre and Sidon – into Gentile country. And a Canaanite woman begins to pester him, because she wants healing for her daughter. Note, please, who this is – a Gentile woman. Someone that Jesus, as a proper Jew, should have nothing to do with, because her sex and her nationality are both against her. So he begins by ignoring her. She persists in her request for mercy, and Jesus says, "I was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" – a more or less polite refusal. My mission is not to you, he says. I won't help you, he implies.

Yet again, she persists; she asks directly for help. And Jesus, for whatever reason, becomes blatantly offensive to her. He says, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

For the moment, I don't care why he says what he says. He might be giving the disciples a teaching moment. He might be testing the woman. He might be cranky and tired and not paying attention to what he's saying. Or... he might actually be acting in a racist manner. Because there is no getting around the fact that what he says is, in fact, racist, when he calls this Canaanite woman a dog.

Dogs, in Jesus' society, are not the sweet and cuddly pets we think of today. For the most part, they were not pets or human companions, although there were herding dogs and working dogs in the society, that lived with families. But usually dogs were feral beasts that slunk around the towns looking for food to snatch; they ran in packs, and carried disease, and made parents afraid

for their children's safety. To call someone a dog is to call them less than human, to call them unwanted and fearsome and disgusting. It's as bad as, or possibly worse than, any of the racial slurs we know and hear in today's society. We can't whitewash this, however much we might want to. Jesus acts like the product of his time and place and uses a racist slur against a Gentile woman who asks him for help. If this doesn't shock us, it should.

And God bless her, the woman doesn't get outwardly angry with him – she owns the term. Again, we don't know why. Most scholars think that she wants her daughter to be healed so much that she will put up with anything. Or perhaps she's heard this term so many times that it just rolls off her back. Whatever the reason, she accepts the label, and says, "Fine, I'm a dog – but even dogs get the master's crumbs. Calling me a dog won't make me go away." If she owns the label, she also owns her humanity, and her persistence forces Jesus to look at her and answer her.

Now, the Gospel tells us only that Jesus answers her, commending her faith and healing her daughter. But I have to hope, as Mike Kinman of All Saints Pasadena has written, that Jesus pauses a moment before he says that, and realizes what he has said and done. I have to hope that Jesus is healed of using racist slurs to get his point across to his disciples and to us today. As I said, I can't tell why Jesus said what he did. I suspect it was a teaching tool, given his track record in the rest of the Gospels of welcoming the stranger, the Samaritan, the various women he met. Most of Jesus' conduct in the Gospels is not racist or sexist, so this incident might not be either. But my point is, when he calls this Canaanite woman a dog, it really wasn't OK. And it's not OK for us, either.

Now, why am I talking about a possibly racist Jesus, when I'm sure that's an offensive idea to many here? Trust me, that idea hurt and offended me, too, at first. I don't want my model for life to be racist, or sexist, or elitist, or any other "ist" that infects our society today. Thinking about Jesus that way, even for a moment, hurts. But if we can move beyond that hurt, we can find another idea, one that is comforting and uplifting. Here it is: Jesus is fully human and fully divine. We often say that, but I'm not sure we, or at least I, really own that as much as we should. If Jesus is fully human, then he is in fact capable of being the product of his time and showing the effects of a racist and sexist culture. We know he gets angry several times in the Gospels; we know he gets frustrated with the disciples for not understanding. So why not take the next step and say that Jesus was raised in what we would now call a racist and misogynist culture, and that it's possible he might have displayed that upbringing in his more human moments?

That next step is offensive, I acknowledge. It might get me into trouble. But I think we have to go there. Because if we go there, then we get a real message of hope as the outcome of this gospel. Jesus. Got. Over. It. He learned from his actions. He became a better person because of this encounter. And – perhaps most tellingly – he opens up his ministry because of it. He tells the woman at the beginning that he's only come to the Jewish people – that salvation isn't for all. And by the end of the Gospel passage, she and her daughter are included in the ones to whom salvation is offered. And that is part of what leads to salvation being open to us, too, we who are for the most part Gentiles and descendants of Gentiles.

And the corollary to this, and the one that we deeply need to hear this morning and every morning, is that if Jesus can do it, then so can we. In fact, so must we. We are called to emulate

Jesus and his life to the best of our ability, and that includes changing our actions so that they tell everyone we meet that we know they are a beloved child of God, and so they know that they are not “less than” because of anything about the way God made them – neither skin color, nor point of origin, nor orientation, nor anything else. It means acknowledging the parts of ourselves that are less savory, that we like to keep hidden and not acknowledge, and doing our best to root them out and repudiate them, and helping and urging others to do the same. To quote Mike Kinman again, “We strive to be Christlike not because Jesus was perfect – if Jesus didn’t struggle, he wouldn’t have been human. We strive to be Christlike because, when confronted with anything less than loving – even in himself – Jesus chose love.”

I had the idea, when I was working on this sermon, that I should start out by saying, “Hi, I’m Sharon, and I’m a recovering racist.” I didn’t – but perhaps I should have. I too am a product of my culture and my time. I absolutely do not believe that anyone is “lesser” in the eyes of God, but I have to acknowledge that my upbringing means that I often have to fight reactions to others that were given to me by my parents and my friends’ parents and my schools and the air I breathed in as a child. I don’t like these reactions, and I don’t believe they’re true, but I know they’re there. And I work hard to root them out, honestly and sincerely, so that I can be in honest truth the person who can stand up to what happens in places like Charlottesville and Barcelona and say “This is wrong. This is evil. I do not accept this as a reflection of my faith or my belief or my country.” I will probably struggle with this my whole life. But I’m going to struggle with it, and own it, and make sure that what I do does not reflect the worse parts of what I learned as a child.

Because this is where the first part of our Gospel passage comes in: what goes into us isn’t what defiles us. We can’t help some of what we learned as children. We all receive teachings that turn out to be incorrect, just as we all eat food that perhaps isn’t the best for us. We can’t necessarily help that. But we can help how we process those teachings, and how we display them in our words and our actions and our lives. That is what defiles us, makes us less like Jesus, and that is what we can strive against.

We all need to do this. We are called as Christ’s brothers and sisters to do this. And this morning’s Gospel is one of the tools that can help us to do that, if we let it. We can, and should, be thankful – to remember our collect once more – that we have this example of Jesus to follow; to know that, however much we need to improve in our ideas and our actions, that Jesus went there first. It is, indeed, good when brethren live together in unity; but it usually takes a whole lot of work and distress before that happens. Please do the work with me. Please sit with the distress and the discomfort so that we all can come out the other side as better Christians, better persons, better brothers and sisters to our neighbors and friends. Please join me in the struggle to overcome the less Christian parts of our culture, and make this world a place where unity isn’t just a word, and where we really can live together in unity and receive God’s blessing all together, no matter who we are.

Amen.