

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name

Pentecost Eleven

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This is a difficult gospel story. The difficulty is in having to deal with an unsavory and derogatory remark against the person and heritage of a Canaanite woman. This gospel story leaves us wondering if the remark was by the same Jesus we have been proclaiming. The Jesus whose stories bleeds with compassion, and is open and affirming is totally opposite this Jesus who tears into this poor woman who simply sought healing for a daughter possessed by demons. What is a mother supposed to do? Watch her daughter waste away or lose her own dignity in an effort to secure healing for her? William Cowper in his poem *Hark My Soul! It Is The Lord* poses this question "Can a woman's tender care, cease towards the child she bare? No, it cannot. The dread, anguish and sheer helplessness in dealing with an incurable illness is unbelievably consuming.

And so for any mother, and especially for this woman, the joy of knowing that Jesus was in her little town, and the relief that Jesus – the master healer, could heal her daughter was all that mattered to her. For that reason, nothing. Absolutely nothing could impede her desire to see that her daughter was well, that her daughter was healed.

In a sense, the condition of the world is no different from the condition of the Canaanite woman's daughter. This is a world possessed by the demons of racism. A world possessed by the demons of bigotry. A world possessed by the demons of hate. A world teetering on destruction because of our collective disregard for justice and fairness, and for not honoring people for who they are.

I want to share a story of an ex-girlfriend who lived in New York. I flew out of Atlanta to visit her on a Friday. She picked me up from LaGuardia and took me to her apartment and fixed me my favorite Ghanaian dish. The next day, we rode the subway to Manhattan. We walked and talked and laughed like any two lovebirds. As we walked, we found ourselves in Chinatown. I could not stop feasting my eyes on the roasted pork hanging out of some of the windows.

Out of nowhere, I just blurted out, I wish I could have some of the pork. I didn't complete my sentence when the girl screamed. Do you eat pork? I said yea, I eat pork. And then she responded "well, I don't eat pork because I am an Adventist, and if we are going to marry, then you have to stop eating pork." I then shot back. Well, I am not asking you to eat pork. I eat pork and you do not have to eat pork. She responded "so long as I am your wife, I will have to cook for you, and I cannot eat or even touch any pork, so you have to stop eating pork." We went back-and-forth about this issue through lunch and through the way home.

When we arrived at home, I quietly called Delta (this was during the time when you could change your ticket without any penalty) and rescheduled my flight from Monday to early Sunday morning. I packed all my stuff, and early Sunday morning, I was out the door, gone. I declined her calls and eventually deleted her phone number. Years later, we reconnected on Facebook. And guess what, this woman now eats pork because she is no longer an Adventist. But we had to break a relationship because she thought there was something wrong with me.

There is nothing wrong about tribal identity, what is wrong is when tribal identity becomes a tool for violence, discrimination, bigotry and pure hatred. There is nothing wrong about eating pork. And there is nothing wrong about not eating pork. What is wrong is when you prevent me from eating pork because you do not eat pork. What is wrong is when you visit violence upon me because of your belief or identity. There is nothing wrong with being a Canaanite woman. And there is nothing wrong with being a Jew from Jerusalem. What is wrong is when a Jesus refers to a Canaanite woman as a dog simply because she came asking for help.

In spite of the insults visited upon her, the Canaanite woman doesn't relent, she pressed on. The disciples wanted the woman sent away, but the woman would not leave. Many are the times when we have turned our heads to look the other way. Many are the times when we have been reluctant to accept our responsibility to speak out. But people of goodwill cannot turn their heads and look the other way. People of goodwill cannot take a step back, remain indifferent or simply walk away because of what others say or do to them. People of goodwill have to keep pressing on because of their firm belief that the world needs healing and reconciliation, and yet more, that the prophetic vision is about a God who gathers all people to Himself, whether those people eat pork or not, whether they are Jews or Canaanites.

The vision that the prophet Isaiah offers is one in which God's salvation is offered to all those who keep the Sabbath and hold fast to God's covenant. God's salvation will come-because it always does. And God's deliverance will open the door, open our eyes and hearts to the reality that we were made to be loved, we were made for something more cosmic and that we will not peacefully fit into anything much smaller than that for which we were made. The fact that we do not peacefully fit into any pigeon hole is why we have to speak up.

Vimala Thakar- an Indian Social Activist and spiritual teacher wrote that "The challenge now is to create an entirely new, vital revolution that takes the whole of life into its sphere. We have never dared the embrace of the whole of life in all its awesome beauty; we've been content to perpetuate fragments, invent corners where we feel conceptually secure and emotionally safe....Today...we can no longer go on with this game of fragmentation."

Watching the demonstrations in Charlottesville on TV left me wondering where, what and how we get to this place of an outward manifestation of hatred. What is it that motivates hate? What leads another to believe that he or she is a better human being than another person because of skin pigmentation or belief system? And what leads someone to believe that they have to act on that hatred? I have been wondering a lot. And it scares me that people still believe in stuff like that. But we will be complicit in such an attitude if we don't feel the need to speak out.

St. Paul's has been more than a home for me and my family. Each Sunday I share with you the joy of worshipping with you-and I mean it. For your presence here attest not only to your desire to worship in a community that celebrates peoples of all races, ethnicities and gender, but to even strain your ears to listen to a clergy of color from Africa.

It has been said, that our reality is one in which we love those in whom we see ourselves. I love my family-as big as it is, because I see myself in each one of them. You also love your family for that same reason. I love you because I see myself in you. You also love me because you see yourselves in me. And we are able to love those who are not family and in distant places because we see ourselves in them as well. And God loves us because God sees Himself in each one of us-that is why it is not far-fetched to claim that God created us in His image. For we bear within ourselves the imprints of God's image. God loves us because God sees Himself in each of us. And so God's house, shall be a house of prayer for all peoples in whom God sees Himself.

“Woman, great is your faith.” Jesus said to the Canaanite woman. But what is the value of faith if it is not rooted in love? Paul argues that hope, faith and love abide, but the greatest is love. And love isn’t love until it is poured out into someone who has the capacity to receive it. And you tell me, who is it that does not possess the capacity to receive love? Who is it? The fact is we all do have that capacity because we can all love.

There is an African proverb which states that “If you think you are too small to make a difference, you may have to spend a night with a mosquito.” Each of us has the capacity for self-transcendence. Each has the capacity to make a difference. Each has the capacity to speak out and reach out. The desire of the Canaanite woman to seek healing for her daughter, in spite of all odds, affirms the idea that love has never been an abstract idea but it is rooted in matter and articulated with substance. The gospel story is a plea for God’s deliverance. And since we all have an equal capacity to receive love, we can only be the new human, our world and communities can be whole like the woman’s daughter if with faith in each other we build new bridges, if we build communities of trust and reconciliation, and if we embrace the love that seeks to incarnate itself in each of us. Amen.