

Eleventh Sunday of Pentecost, Year A, August 16, 2020

WELCOME

Call to Worship: "Christ Be Our Light" (handout)

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 15:(10-20), 21-28

(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 offense 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.

HYMN AFTER SCRIPTURE: "Happiness Is to Know the Savior" (#411)

SERMON:

These are the fun days as a pastor. When we have texts that challenge us. Cause us to knit our brows and wonder what we might be missing as we read it. These are the days when I can totally geek out and dig through the exegetical interpretations.

This Canaanite woman, for example—whom Jesus does not immediately serve, but rather only after she pleads her case—what's up there?

Some theologians say Jesus was testing her faith, some say Jesus was struggling in his mind with the idea of a mission to the Gentiles and not solely to the house of Israel (a bigger issue in Matthew than the other Gospels), some say Jesus was bringing her to an appropriate humility in her faith—I could go on and on

In fact this is what I love about preaching the lectionary—churches all around us that follow the lectionary are hearing a theological interpretation of this Canaanite woman in Matthew. And I'll be honest in saying that any one of these interpretations can lead a pastor and a congregation into a path of faith engagement, discernment, and nurture. It is engagement of faith that matters, not some absolutism in understanding as our Western minds are so accustomed to.

How about this? If you meet someone else today, someone that attends another church, ask that person how the Gospel, how Jesus's interaction with the Canaanite woman was interpreted today? And if their understanding is different than yours, are they any "lesser" than you? No! Because that's not what matters—what matters is that each of you engaged your faith and sought to bring the abstract ideology into your everyday life so that you may live as a Christian.

In Bible Study, I call this the "what" and the "so what"—and it is that "so what" that God is wanting you to receive. Remember, we don't read the Bible like a cookbook, we read it because "oh my God we love to cook."

So no matter the differences in interpretation, as a good UCC minister, let me share the common ground:

We know that this woman was not a Jew, not one of "their" people here in Matthew. And we know that she gave Jesus the honor of being called "Lord, Son of David"—which has a messianic quality to it, something really not mentioned in Matthew up to this point, not by the Jewish people—but rather, from the "other"...

And let me lift that up for a moment: take a breath... now consider in your heart whom you consider to be "your people"... put some faces to it. Now consider who is NOT "your people" —who is different from you. Who is "the other?" How are they different from you? What are the barriers between you that prevent you from sharing in harmony?

There are times I wonder if maybe it is actually WE that are "the other" in our culture. Really. In this day and age of argument and division, of a hunger to attain, or retain, wealth and power, or to be absolutely right at the expense of lessening the other, in the signs of totalitarianism rising in our country--

What up with these "Jesus-loving Christians?" I mean, what place is there for humble people in this day and age, people that listen to one another and honor one another no matter their perspectives, people that love and pray and share with others that aren't like them?

What place is there for these Jesus-loving Christians who say wealth is not the priority for a life, power and prestige are not priorities in life—how “un-American” and un-Capitalist after all. What place is there for those that stop and pick up the person that has fallen, tend to their wounds and nurture them and not cast them off like so much garbage?

We know this: that this Canaanite woman, this “other”, used her voice and did not stop until she shared her faith and was heard.

And so I tell you: use your voice! Whether you feel like the “other” or not!

If you don't feel like the other, as one with privilege and power, say to others around you—I will not turn my back on those that are different from me. I will not accept a culture or country that seeks to elevate certain people and keep other people down. Use your voice!

And if you do feel like the other, use your voice! Even if the people around you think they are better than you, even if other voices are louder than yours, even if they are better at arguing and dominating and getting their way. Even if they brush you off and try to make you their lesser--

Use your voice.

I'm proud of the UCC's heritage here, how we've used our voice as a denomination throughout the years. Just one example is how we lifted up worship leaders in the past—in the churches of the past that merged to form UCC in the 50's, there is a beautiful and proud tradition of using our voices.

When the culture around us told us that women should be treated as lesser, we said no, and ordained the first woman as a leader in ministry. When our culture around us told us that people of color were considered lesser, we said no, and ordained our first African-American as a leader in ministry. When our culture around us told us that people that didn't fit the two extremes of the gender spectrum should be treated as lesser—and I should say “people that didn't hide their unique place on the gender spectrum”, for it has been around as long as humanity—anyway, when we were told they should be treated as lesser, we said no, and ordained our first member of the LGBT community. (That was back in the 70's, by the way—we've always been ahead of the curve on our culture's arch toward inclusivity).

What's next? What is our next chapter in the endless work of saying “all people are truly equal in the eyes of God and should be treated as such?”

...and now you have a pastor that is telling you turning our eyes backward toward preserving the traditions of the past is not what Jesus has called us to do. Indeed, the church spent many years doing that, and the church almost closed its doors.

God... calls us... forward. Into new life, into engaging the ministry of Jesus. And all along the way, Jesus had people say “well, we never did it THAT way before”—

In fact, it is Jesus challenging the “traditions” of the church that prompts the argument between He and the Pharisees in the first portion of our Gospel today. Now this may be regarding the laws of “ritual cleansing”—which may not seem relevant to us now (the only “ritual cleaning” in know of here is the Linde’s coming in every week)

—Wait a minute, aren’t we gathering in a time of pandemic with expectation that we maintain hygiene protocol, that we mask, and wash our hands, and as we close our service engage in “ritual” cleansing. So what if the “other” comes in that does not observe our present “ritual cleansing”? We would consider that person a threat to our safety. And isn’t that what the Pharisees considered Jesus to be? A threat to what they knew to be safe?

Isn’t that what stepping forward out of tradition is all about? Be it taking an unpopular position in a culture for the sake of equality and justice—like ordaining people of diversity as equals, or reminding a congregation that looking only backwards to the past is not what Jesus calls us to do. It is all “a threat to what we consider to be safe.”

A good example is how we use our financial resources in this time when things are lean and the growth of ministry is difficult. Do we use our money in the spirit of scarcity to preserve the name and the building and the tradition? Or do we use it to courageously step forward into the new life God is calling each of us into, and together as one?

I say this because many of the leaders in our church are here today, because we have a meeting of our coordinating council after the service, and this is very much an issue that we prayerfully discern as leaders of this Christian church:

Do we behave like the Pharisees and focus on tradition, or do we behave like Jesus and bring forth something new?

How do we use our voice? And that begins with this question: “How do you use your voice?” And do the words you share, like that Canaanite woman—no matter how you are interpreted—honor Jesus as the Messiah and engage in his ministry. Will your faith make you well?

HYMN AFTER SERMON: “Lonely Voices Crying in the City” (#482)

JOYS AND CONCERNS
PASTORAL PRAYER

LORD'S PRAYER

CLOSING HYMN: "Just When I Need Him Jesus is Near" (#412)

BENEDICTION