

Sermon on Matthew 15:10-28
11th Sunday after Pentecost, August 20, 2017
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

The gospel from Matthew teaches us two lessons today: one challenges what “impurity” is – whether it’s marked by what goes “in” to our mouths or by what comes “out” of our mouths. The second lesson is about the nature of “faith” – that it is not marked by “who” you are and where you came from (as a Jew, a Canaanite, a Christian or Muslim), but rather by holding to your hope in God’s mercy with *persistence* – a lesson which Jesus had to learn himself from a Canaanite woman who wouldn’t take “no” for an answer! She demanded mercy!

First, that thing about purity. As Jesus often pointed out in the gospels, Pharisees, scribes and other religious leaders were overly concerned with what kinds of foods entered peoples’ mouths, which could defile a person and make them spiritually unclean. So strict rules were found in the Law of Moses for food preparation, and the washing of hands before eating, to keep one clean. There were also strict rules for the sexual behavior of males and females – breaking these rules would make you spiritually unclean, and you could be ostracized from the community. Jesus challenged these rules, by saying that it was not food that went into your mouth and to your stomach that makes you unclean, but evil thoughts that come from deep in your heart, and out through your mouth as words, which defile a person. For it is not food going in, but evil thoughts from the heart that result in evil intentions, murder, adultery, theft, slander and other sinful behavior. The Pharisees were very offended by that, because they had always been taught to follow the rules and traditions prescribed by the Law. How “dare” Jesus say they weren’t important! And that evil didn’t come from the “outside”, but from deep within each one of us. What Jesus taught was way different! So Jesus left that place, because he was getting so much pushback from the Pharisees who had taken offense. Their rage made them blind to God’s mercy and their neighbor in need. We have that same problem with evil today.

Now about that troubling story about the Canaanite woman with a daughter who was possessed by a demon. She could find no one who could help her, but she had heard about Jesus coming to town – in the coastal region near Tyre and Sidon. She had heard that Jesus had the power to heal, so by golly, she was going to put herself forward and get some help from him. When she saw Jesus, she called out “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.”

Jesus purposely ignored her. She was a Canaanite after all, and a woman, of no concern to him. His disciples urged him to send her away, because she

wouldn't shut up! She wasn't a shy, polite Minnesotan – she was more like a brash New Yorker or a native of Chicago, and she wasn't taken no for an answer! Jesus, we discover, was very rude to the woman. He said “I have come only for the lost sheep of Israel, not for foreigners.” Ouch. That must have hurt. But she persisted. It must not have been her first rejection. She demanded mercy. She knelt before Jesus and said “Jesus, help me.” Then Jesus gave the worst insult of all, when he said “It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs!” God's mercy was meant for Israel, and not for foreigners. Sounds more like a 21st century American evangelical, politician or president, than Jesus! But this woman still wouldn't give up, and said “Yes, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table.” Then Jesus “woked up” – “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done as you wish!” And her daughter was healed instantly.

What turned Jesus around? He saw the faith of this woman, that she would not let go of her faith in God's mercy and his power to heal, no matter how many insults and rejections she heard. Jesus had gotten pushback from self righteous Pharisees so that he was unable to do any healing among them. But here among these foreigners, he witnessed such persistence in faith from this Canaanite woman, that even Jesus learned something about faith! I am of the opinion that even Jesus could learn something from a person of faith, who spoke out of vulnerability, passion and pain. It reminds me of Abraham, who bargained with God for mercy for the people of Sodom, pleading for God's mercy if he could find even ten righteous people in that city! But even though we are at first shocked at Jesus' insensitivity to the woman's plight (it is so much like our own insensitivity to the suffering of others whom we don't know), in the end, the woman's faith was strong enough to move Jesus to see her as a human being. Her daughter was healed – the demon was gone – and salvation came to her house!

I see several parallels between this story and what we are going through today in America (and in the Church). For example, there are a lot of people in America worried about “purity” of faith, of culture, and of “race”. For generations “purity” has been defined by Christians as regarding sexual morality, and abstinence from alcohol, card playing, dancing and foul language – but racism and hate is okay. That's Pharisee talk! Now, too many people are worried about immigrants (who aren't Christian, or white) coming into this country legally or illegally, defiling the perceived “purity” of America, diluting its culture with diversity in language, custom, skin color and faith. We forgot where we came from!

But it's not what comes “into” this country that defiles us, if I can borrow Jesus' language here. What is defiling us today in America is what is coming out of our mouths, the evil thoughts and the racist, hateful words that are coming out of our hearts and mouths against other people. It has started in recent years in harsh

words for those with whom we disagree politically, but it has really crossed the line this year into a new dimension of hate, against immigrants, Mexicans, Blacks, Muslims, Jews and others. We saw this hatred on open display last weekend when white supremacists and Neo-Nazis marched with torches into Charlottesville, Virginia to protest the proposed removal of Confederate General Robert E. Lee's statue from a public park – and along the way, they threatened people with automatic weapons, and shouted hateful slogans against Jews, Blacks, and immigrants – “you will not replace us” - and the Nazi slogan “blood and soil” from Hitler's Germany. (Didn't our parents and grandparents fight and die OPPOSING such hatred?) This hate seemed to come from their very core, for whatever reason we don't know, “but what came out of their mouths proceeded from the heart, and that is what defiles” them and America today, if we don't stop it, and cleanse our hearts. This hate has always been there, but some saw it clearly for the first time last week.

But we have also witnessed *persistence of faith* in America today, from many of those who continue to oppose hate, and keep their faith in the God-given values of compassion, mercy, reconciliation and diversity. We saw it in the clergy and religious leaders in Charlottesville who marched and stood together hand-in-hand with each other, facing down militia members with automatic weapons, armed only with their prayers and hymns, who sang “This Little Light of Mine” to drown out chants of “Blood and Soil” from the fascists and Neo-Nazis. We also saw the persistent courage of University of Virginia students and other demonstrators who peacefully stood in opposition to the hatred that invaded their town, and got beat up in the process. We saw courage and faith in a young woman named Heather Heyer, who was in the group demonstrating against hate last Saturday, when a Neo-Nazi rammed his car into the crowd, killing her and injuring 19 others. Some of the Neo-Nazi leaders insulted her by calling her a slut, saying they were glad that she was dead – that because she opposed their cause, she didn't matter. Tough guys. Until they were “outed” on the internet.

But we saw the strength and persistence of faith from her parents in the memorial service held on Wednesday, who remembered their daughter and her passion for justice. Her mother, Susan Bro, was especially eloquent with her words, demanding that we all to carry on the work of justice as her legacy. She said this: *“Although Heather was a caring and compassionate person, so are a lot of you. A lot of you go that extra mile. And I think that what happened to Heather has struck a chord, because we know that what she did was achievable. We don't all have to die. We don't all have to sacrifice our lives. They tried to kill my child to shut her up. Well, guess what? You just magnified her!*

So here's what I want to happen...I want this to spread. I don't want this to die. This is just the beginning of Heather's legacy, it's not the end. You need to

find in your heart that small spark of accountability. What is there that I can do to make the world a better place? What injustice do I see and want to turn away? "I don't want to get involved. They'll be annoyed with me. My boss might think less of me." I don't care. You point a finger at yourself like Heather would have done, and you make it happen. You take that extra step. You find a way to make a difference in the world." Well, then.

You see, even though the life of Heather Heyer ended too soon, and tragically, her death has meaning because she died fighting for decency, the common good, and for justice. Too many people have died already – black, brown, and white. Her mother has hope that her fight will carry on in the work of faithful people everywhere, which is what will bring healing in the end. So she said, *"The truth is, we are going to have our differences, we are going to be angry with each other, but let's change – will that anger, not into hate, not violence, not into fear, but let's channel that anger into righteous anger...So remember, in your heart, if you're not outraged, you're not paying attention. Make a point to look at what's wrong, and say to yourself, 'What can I do to make a difference.'"* And that's how you're going to make my child's death worthwhile. *I'd rather have my child, but by golly, if I have to give her up, we are going to make it count."* She said it better than any of us could say it.

This, my friends, is faith. Persistent, hopeful faith in a world that can be filled with mercy and grace, instead of hatred, violence, and hateful words. Like the Caananite woman, this mother demanded it in 2017, by her daughter's grave. So as the prophet Isaiah says, *"Thus says the Lord: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance will be revealed. And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord...for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered."*

God's mercy is for everyone. Our faith demands it. Thanks be to God.
Amen.