

Sermon (August 16, 2020)

When I participated in catechumenate at St. Andrew's earlier this century, I asked our Rector at the time Connie Delzell "what do Episcopalians believe?" Catechumenate was my introduction to the Episcopal Church, and I wasn't really getting a clear sense of it from the presentations and discussions. It was a sensible question to me because, as an engineer, I like to understand how things work and how they work together as part of an overall system.

Her answer, at least as I remember it, did not immediately satisfy me. She said, "If you want to know about Episcopal theology read the Book of Common Prayer because our theology is expressed through our prayer and worship." I remember thinking, well that's a big help.

In our worship today the Collect of the Day is a prayer that will follow shortly after this sermon. Watch for it. In that prayer, the choir will sing "Almighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us a sacrifice for sin and also an example of godly life: Give us grace to receive thankfully the fruits of his redeeming work, and to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life."

I am NOT going to address what I - or we - might believe when we give thanks for Jesus as a sacrifice for sin. I'll leave that for the bolder theologians among us. Instead, I want to focus on our thanksgiving for Jesus as the example of godly life and our prayer, for grace, and strength, I assume, to follow daily in his blessed steps.

In the Gospel today, Jesus is on a campaign swing with his disciples and he has just left one event and on his way to another. His mission is to regather "the lost sheep of Israel." Into the rhythm of the campaign bursts a Canaanite woman shouting her needs and demanding Jesus' attention.

Have you ever been in a public place where someone, perhaps dirty and somewhat incoherent, has burst in on you and the people you are with, asking or demanding something? My reaction has typically been that of Jesus's initial response - to ignore the person - and, like the disciples, to want the person to go away.

But is that the response that we are praying for when we ask for the strength and grace to model the life of Jesus? What we remember from this Gospel story is that Jesus had both the strength and grace to engage with this woman and, ultimately, cast out the demon tormenting her daughter. The story has a happy ending and the reputation of Jesus grows because of it.

But as I experience this story, Jesus exhibits some troubling behavior. In addition to initially excluding this Canaanite woman from those he was trying to reach in his ministry (the children of Israel) he refers to her people as dogs and states there is no justice in giving dogs the food intended for the children of Israel. The woman is an outsider and that is just the presumed and accepted order of things.

In Howard Thurman's "Jesus and the Disinherited," one of the sources being used to inform discussions about race and white privilege in the Sacred Ground program at St. Andrew's, Thurman says "Most of the accepted social behavior-patterns assume segregation to be normal – if normal, then correct; if correct, then moral; if moral then religious. Religion is thus made a defender and guarantor of the presumptions." It seems that Jesus, in this story, is comfortably living within the presumptions of the more dominant cultures about the worth of the Canaanite woman.

Our world is, and always has been, full of segregation: black/white, rich/poor, Jew/Gentile, and other means of division. The scriptures often seem to accept that. In the second lesson, Paul is speaking to the Gentiles about how God's mercy is now available to the Gentiles because God's

“Chosen” people screwed up and broke their covenant with God. But with typical, at least in my experience, Pauline optimism Paul tells the Gentiles they will screw up too, but that God has mercy for all.

Some have taken the ancient genealogies in Genesis and attempted to ascribe racial differences and other justifications to argue that the Canaanites deserved to be disinherited because they screwed up. Well, not them exactly, but Ham who was one of the sons of Noah. Ham screwed up in Noah’s eyes and Noah cursed Ham’s son – Canaan – to perpetual slavery (or service) to other branches of the family. After a few more generations (8 if I counted them right), an ancestor of Shem, one of Noah’s other sons, was selected by God to be the father of God’s chosen people. According to Genesis, God directed that ancestor, Abram, to go to the land of Canaan and God promised that land to Abram’s descendants. Bad news for the Canaanites.

As in the past, we have those who live in the dominant culture today and we have the disinherited today. If we follow in the example of Jesus - as we pray we want to do – we can ask ourselves many questions. How much do we accept these divisions in our society and what are we willing to do to change the status quo? Does it require sacrifice? Are we aware of our role in these divisions? When we are aware, will we act on that awareness?

My parents used to counsel my sister and me that life is not fair, but we always acted like it should be. When something unfair happened to us we would howl with complaint. What I don’t remember is when we benefited from something that was unfair to someone else, if we even noticed. Perhaps following in Jesus’ godly example begins with noticing injustice and division.

I don’t know if you do this too, but I confess that I selectively pick the lessons in scripture that fit with what I want to be true and discount those that are contrary to what seems right to me.

[For those of you watching this through Facebook, I encourage you to write your own theological confessions in the chat, if you dare.]

The things I like in today's scriptures are Paul's statement about God's mercy for all. Jesus casting out the demon from the Canaanite woman's daughter. Isaiah's simple instructions from God in the first lesson to "maintain justice and do what is right," and in the psalmist's writing for today the prayer that God's "ways be known upon the earth, [God's] saving health among ALL nations." Emphasis placed on ALL, not some, nations.

Returning to our prayer in the Collect of the Day - that we "follow daily in the blessed steps of [Jesus'] most holy life" – what is our response? For me it probably starts with paying attention and noticing. Noticing when I have benefited and someone else has not. Noticing, rather than turning away from, the homeless. Engaging with, rather than ignoring, the shouting Canaanite woman. But what will it cost me to pay attention and notice?

In the story of Jesus today he noticed the Canaanite woman and heard her pleas. It was not on his campaign itinerary or plan for the day, but he granted the woman her request. And what did it cost Jesus to do this? Absolutely nothing as far as I can tell from the story.

And that is really the most significant message of the story for me: abundance, the abundance of God's grace and mercy. Despite the imagery of the dogs eating the crumbs that fall from the masters table, there is enough grace and mercy for the Canaanite woman. Despite the divisions in our culture, there is enough grace and mercy for the disinherited. There is enough of God's grace and mercy for all.

Let us pray. Almighty God, give us grace to receive thankfully the fruits of Jesus' redeeming work, and to follow daily in the blessed steps of Jesus' most holy life. **Amen.**