

Healing our past

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, August 20, 2017.

Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly. Matthew 15:28

In the gospel narrative today, Jesus and his followers are on the shores of the Mediterranean between the cities of Tyre and Sidon. The crowd has gathered to hear what Jesus has to say about dietary laws and the unclean foods that are not for consumption. He makes the point that what defiles us is not what we consume but what comes out from our hearts.

From the midst of the crowd comes a Canaanite woman pleading for her daughter to be healed of the torments of a demon. What then was described as demon possession would be today be diagnosed as a mental disorder that can be treated with medication and therapy. What follows is difficult to reconcile with what we know of the compassionate nature of Jesus. He at first ignores the woman's plea. He then tells her that he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. (Matthew 15:24) Not to be put off, she kneels before him and persists in pleading for her daughter to be healed. He then tells her, it isn't fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs! (Matthew 15:26) The centerpiece of this story is her quick-witted response, Yes Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table. (Matthew 15:27) Her strong faith enables her to keep her wits about her in the face of the tradition that the Jewish people were God's chosen. Because of the mother's persistent faith, her daughter is healed.

While Jesus appears uncharacteristically insensitive, it is his way of testing her faith. Canaanites were known to worship false gods and idols and the reference to gentiles as dogs is a play on words. Gentiles were thought to be like the innocent puppies in Jewish households that gathered up the crumbs that fell from the master's table.

The remarkable thing about the Canaanite woman's faith is that she is willing to go to any length and endure any test in her conviction that her daughter can be healed. Quick witted as she is, her retort reveals her belief that those from other religious backgrounds are worthy of God's grace and healing power. She has far more than a crumb of faith, greater than any restrictions against religious differences.

This story serves to remind us of the long history of on-going and deep-seated prejudice and distrust between races, religions and nationalities. While there have been great strides in understanding and acceptance of those from diverse religious heritages, there is still work to be done to overcome prejudice, racism and anti-Semitism. What we all need to remember is that we all belong to the human race before we identify with any other. Each and every one of us is a child of God with the same needs for compassion, understanding and respect and no one has the right to judge another's worthiness for God's grace. We all have a place in God's realm. If the gospel is good news for us, it is good for everyone. If it is not for everyone, it's not for anyone.

While there were significant advances during the civil rights movement of the 1960's, we must continue to work together to break out of the confines and boundaries that separate us. We must hold to the ideal that equal opportunity is for all, regardless of gender, race, age, class, sexuality or religion.

The reemergence of hate groups, white nationalists, neo-Nazis and the Klan must be condemned. While the first amendment to the Constitution guarantees free speech and the right of the people peaceably to assemble, there is always the risk of inciting violence. We are glad that the "free speech" rally in Boston yesterday was peaceful.

People in the southern states are dealing with removing and relocating the monuments that memorialize those who fought on the side of the Confederacy to preserve the institution of slavery. I am a great-grandson of four men who were on opposite sides the Civil War, one of whom was a surgeon in the Confederate army. My southern Virginia ancestors owned slaves and I'm not proud of that. My southern grandfather who was born during the Civil War quite seriously warned my father that if he married my mother, a native of Washington D.C., that their children would be, as he put it, part Yankee!

All of the original founding fathers, with the exception of John Adams, were slave owners. It is important to stand in solidarity in non-violent resistance against all forms of hatred, bigotry and oppression. Hate groups must never be given an excuse to engage in violence.

The love of God in Christ heals the divisions between people of different colors, nationalities and religions. The premise that all men are created equal originally referred to white land-owning males. It took a century and a half for that to include women, African Americans and Native Americans.

When you think about it, if we believe in the principle of equality of opportunity for all, no group or individual should be referred to as a "minority." If we believe in equality, no one should be thought of in minor terms.

Americans value individualism and we still hear that oft quoted aphorism that God helps those who help themselves, but you won't find that in the Bible. It is from Ben Franklin's Poor Richard's Almanac, though its origins go back to Aesop's Fables and the Greek philosophers. It is all well and good to aspire to the qualities of individualism and self-reliance, but part of being self-reliant is to ask for help when you need it. The plain and simple truth is that if you are to pull yourself up by your bootstraps you have to have the bootstraps with which to pull yourself up.

The total solar eclipse we will be watching tomorrow reminds us of the wondrous nature of our infinite universe and the relative insignificance of our own finite worlds. I hope that this natural phenomenon will remind us of the need to be in solidarity on the side of fairness and justice. As we witness this event forming a bond across our nation, let it be a reminder that we are first of all members of the human race. We all have the same needs and all deserve the same understanding and respect. We must never relax our stand against the tyranny of bigotry and hatred. Reaching across the false barriers that separate us brings us closer to the mutual understanding and respect necessary for the survival of humankind.