

Sermon Proper 15 Year A 2017

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

Psalm 67

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

Matthew 15: 21-28

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Last Sunday and this week, I am hearing our lessons in a new light, almost as if they were chosen specifically for us today.

From the Hebrew scripture, our lesson from Isaiah speaks so clearly as if the passage were chosen following the events in Charlottesville last weekend. “Thus says the Lord: Maintain justice, and do what is right, ...” Then what God proclaims from the prophet Isaiah is quite extraordinary and must have been shocking.

“For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” Not some, but all. And this is the proclamation that is posted at The Episcopal Cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul in Washington otherwise known as the National Cathedral. TEC understands that this cathedral is truly a “House of prayer for all people” as it serves as the site of official state funerals and special services at critical times. Some of these services at the Cathedral have shocked people in light of the breadth of readings, music, and prayer included in the worship. But familiarity with this passage might help us understand the mission that the cathedral is called to.

Isaiah continues, “Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.” This is confirmation of one of God’s primary tasks. God is a gatherer or as I like to think a weaver. A weaver of a fabric of relationships around each of us. This is the fabric that sustains us at times of crisis, loss, and despair as well as during times of joy and delight.

Isaiah’s message to the people of Israel was quite extraordinary. God was calling not just Israelites who had gone astray but ethnic groups from different

backgrounds and other walks of life. This I believe connects with the clash of cultures that we are experiencing today .

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus and the disciples are on their way in Gentile territory. They were on a mission and may have had people waiting to hear Jesus teach or heal. When a Syro-Phoenician woman (a Canaanite woman) in need approaches them boldly imploring Jesus for assistance. The Canaanites were ancestral enemies of Israel and so by traditional Jewish standards this woman represents the immoral godless and ritually unclean.

“Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting...” So much for gentility, dignity and respect. Shouting, she addresses Jesus as Lord, Son of David. “Have mercy on me,” she says. We worship a God whose property is always to have mercy. Yet, Jesus did not respond initially and not because he did not hear her. Jesus starts out not even acknowledging her. But you see, it’s not where we start out but where we end up that counts. The disciples want him to go beyond turning a deaf ear and send her away. Jesus offers a rationale for why he cannot be bothered. He was, “Sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she is not put off and kneeling before him she asks again, “Lord, help me.” And then Jesus rebuffs her ungraciously.

But even this does not deter her and so for a third time she speaks. “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Each time she acknowledges his Lordship, his religious status. Her response breaks through. Suddenly, Jesus can hear her addressing him as Lord and he responds to her at last. While Jesus initially responded with the characteristic Hebrew prejudice, it seems that Jesus cannot turn away from someone in need even when they come from a group that had long been considered enemies of Israel and thus outside the purview of God’s love and concern. So Jesus acted and her daughter was then healed “instantly.”

The Isaiah and Mt. passages seem to be saying that God’s circle of inclusion is wide. Isaiah is saying that God welcomes those who are drawn to faith. Houses of worship are to be open and welcoming. Even Jesus appears to be gaining insight and appreciating just how broad his mission is. Sent to the lost sheep of the

house of Israel, the Hebrew people, yet his mission is expanding. You see it doesn't matter where you start. What is important is where you end up. Jesus initially ignored the Canaanite woman, influenced no doubt by Hebrew prejudice. But the woman was persistent and appealing to Jesus as Lord, he heard her call and responded.

So our lessons speak of the breadth of God's love and concern and our invitation in this mission. This happens at a time when some feel threatened by such broad welcoming. They long for purity. They long for the good old days when things were clearer. Or at least they were good for those with power and privilege.

So what do these lessons say to us? Are they about welcome? Well, yes. Particularly the Isaiah passage, which encourages us to welcome all who come.

But I think the gospel goes a step further. Jesus is on the way, he wasn't cloistered in worship. He was clearly interrupted in the midst of a journey. So what might this be saying to us in our lives? Well, it goes against a narrative of purity, whether religious, racial, socio-economic, etc. And it speaks to our everyday lives not just our worship settings.

If we are to love our neighbor, what does that look like? Love is a verb. Love is lived out in action. Love is not an emotion or feeling. Feelings come and go.

When we love someone, we actively engage with them, we commit to them, we work and will on their behalf. So, if God is trying to stretch us, as Jesus seemed to be stretched, then we have to look at our lives.

If you are like me, you tend to travel in routine pathways but do those pathways bring us into contact with the breadth of diversity in our community? In order to hear those who may be calling out for help, we may need to travel new paths or change the patterns of our lives. Or perhaps read more broadly.

Are the connections and relationships of our lives representing the full breadth of God's beloved community gathered around us? How connected are we to others? Do we read the paper and ask ourselves what is the meaning for us? Last Wednesday's paper released the SOL scores for the public school systems.

What does that mean or say to us? In response we might volunteer to tutor or if unable to do this we might contribute our time or funds to supporting the area Backpack Feeding programs. We might contribute school supplies. We might volunteer with the Boys and Girls Clubs. Or we might support the United Way's programs to improve childhood education in our area. But we have to ask ourselves what does this mean to me? As I like to say, ask ourselves the tough question, "What would Jesus have us do?"

Are we living connected across the full breadth of our community? If not, how might we connect in new ways? If we hear a call to feed the hungry, we can volunteer at Daily Bread or the St. John's Greenhouse at LG. Or volunteer at the Yoder Center or drive for Meals on Wheels or drive the Veggie Van for Lynchburg Grows.

If we hear the woman in the Gospel imploring us on behalf of her daughter, we might volunteer at the Cancer Center or one of the hospitals. All of this takes time and commitment, requiring hard work and action because love is a verb. We can't just sit idly by and say, I love everyone. Prayer is a start but we must also act.

If we are raising our family or still working, we may not have much time for volunteering. Well, perhaps we should be looking at the diversity or breadth of our interactions in the community? Whether professionals, sales persons, or service persons such as painters, landscapers, cleaners, banks, or stores. Should we be asking ourselves: How representative of the community are those who I interact with?

If we cannot leave home or get out what can we do? Or we don't feel safe in other neighborhoods. Well, we can broaden our understanding. We can actually address the prejudices we have been raised with by diversifying our sources of connection and information. Studies on prejudice show that our response to seeing someone is almost instantaneous. Our response occurs before we have a time to filter it. And this is hard to alter. But two things have been shown to have an impact. Building relationships with folks from groups we have not been connected to is one option. But also, one way to impact our innate prejudice is by reading

uplifting stories of the lives of people from other racial and ethnic groups. This has the power to impact our deeply held and unconscious prejudice. Which we all have. Remember, it doesn't matter where you start out, it's where you end up.

I think today's scripture has profound implications for our lives. Each of us is being called to reflect upon the role we can play to make this world as the song says, "a better place" by "reaching out and touching somebodies hand."

Laura Casler's story shared as our reflection at the beginning of the Vestry meeting on Wednesday night. One of our members is a middle school guidance counselor. School began last Monday and the week before was a busy one. One afternoon, as she was preparing for registration to open in an hour with much left to do, a woman came to her office. She was older and walked with difficulty. She asked if L. could assist her with registering her granddaughter. Well, that was actually the last thing she wanted to do, but she said yes, she would be happy to. She sat with the woman at the computer and began the process. It took the full hour. At the end the woman asked if she would mind calling her a cab. How had she arrived? By bus and then walking the several blocks to the school. L. replied that she would not call her a cab but would take her home. So she put her in her car and drove her home to a neighborhood very different from her own. This woman's house was very well kept, the prettiest on the block. On the way there she learned much of this woman's story and how she supports her granddaughter. On getting out, the woman asked how much she owed? Nothing she said, well then thank you very much. She did not have time but she made time. She opened herself to relationship. And the experience was one she will never forget.

Today's collect expressed it well, "Give us grace to receive thankfully the fruits of Jesus' redeeming work, and to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life." While we have probably all been saddened by recent events, I believe Jesus is showing us a way forward. It doesn't matter where we begin, what matters is where we end up.