

Year A, Proper 15
Genesis 45:1-15
Psalm 133
Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32
Matthew 15:10-28

The Rev. Chris Fair Beebe
St. Francis Episcopal Church
Rutherfordton, NC
August 20, 2017

In the name of God, our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. *Amen.*

Sometimes I wish God would make the scriptures less relevant. It's not hard to connect today's lessons with the state of our culture, our nation and our world, and especially with the events that took place in Charlottesville, Virginia beginning just over a week ago. Every time there's an incident of hatred and violence—and the frequency *is* alarming—the words spoken by Rodney King in Los Angeles twenty-six years ago come to mind: “Why can't we all just get along?” I imagine God is sadly pondering that same question, just as God has likely done for thousands of years, as scripture often reminds us.

Last week we heard the beginning of the story of Joseph and his brothers and today we hear how their rivalry was resolved. A lot happens between these two passages, and if you don't know the story or haven't read it in a long time, I encourage you to do that. It begins in Genesis 37 and continues through the end of the book. It might be good to read the entire book of Genesis for background, as this is not the only story about sibling rivalry or personal conflict you'll find there or in other places in the Old Testament. We can't forget about Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, Rebecca and Leah, Abimelech and his brothers, and the list goes on. Some of them will make the dysfunction of our own families seem tame. When will we learn? Perhaps God put us in families to teach us how to get along with others whom we would not be expected to love.

Loving our neighbors as ourselves is the heart of the Gospel, and today's lesson from Matthew brings it home, although in a way we may not be prepared for because it gives us a close look at Jesus in his full humanity. He's just had an argument with some Pharisees, who as you know, were Jews who focused on the application of the law for every day living. They saw themselves as keepers of the law, ready to confront anyone who doesn't keep it, or who keeps it improperly.

In Matthew's Gospel, we get a clear picture of the animosity between the Pharisees and Jesus. This group of Pharisees had come from Jerusalem to talk with Jesus about his disciples. They approach their concerns much like unrelated adults who think they best know how to raise someone else's children: “I'm sure you don't know your children haven't been washing their hands before lunch. It can't be holy for them to eat with dirty hands!” But Jesus is not going to get hung up on whether or not the disciples washed their hands before they ate. He has other, more important things to do.

We can see why their remarks offended him. This confrontation occurs immediately after stories of Jesus' miracles: feeding, teaching, and healing huge crowds of people, bringing to them God's spirit of love, mercy and grace, and showing them what he believes *is* important in God's kingdom. He comes right back at the Pharisees with questions about the motivations for their own actions, and after this heated exchange, calls his followers to him again to teach them what God's law is really about. “It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” It's not what a person eats that makes him unclean, it's what he says, his words.

While Jesus' words fly in the face of Jewish purity codes, they also fly in the face of our own our practices and habits. We love to talk, to other people and about other people, and sometimes our words come out before they have been filtered or edited. What we've eaten isn't really going to bother someone else. But our words have the ability to build up or tear down. They can diffuse or ignite, soothe or aggravate, accuse or exonerate, criticize or praise. We need only watch the reaction of those with whom we speak to understand the impact of what we say. With a single word, we can invite or dismiss, include or exclude, just as Jesus did in his conversation with the Canaanite woman. Perhaps Matthew intentionally ordered these stories to show us what Jesus meant; but if we've been listening to Jesus, we find his attitude toward this woman shocking! When she asks him to heal her daughter, he doesn't answer her until the disciples egg him on. “Send her

away, for she keeps shouting after us.” He tells her that he “was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” and makes it clear that doesn’t include her.

We all know there was ongoing, open conflict between Jews and Gentiles in those days, and the Canaanites *were* Gentiles. What we often forget is that *Jesus was a Jew*. In his book *Zealot*, Reza Aslan reminds us that we must never lose sight of that fundamental fact. Aslan asserts that Jesus was a Jew preaching Judaism to other Jews,” that he was “concerned exclusively with the fate of his fellow Jews,” and that “Israel was all that mattered to Jesus.”ⁱ The Gospels are full of subtle reminders of that, yet we’re so focused on his teachings we forget it. Yet remembering it can give insight to statements like “I have not come to bring peace, but the sword,” and I come not to abolish the law but to fulfill it.” Jesus was a renegade, rebelling against the Jewish status quo, but he was still Jewish, first and always. We put him in the context of Christianity; but he was not a Christian.

When Jesus changes his mind, listens to the woman’s pleadings, and on the spot heals her daughter, we’re given evidence of his rebellion against the laws, traditions, and practices of ancient Judaism. But his is not the only lesson to learn here. We can learn from the disciples who, despite what they had seen and heard from their Lord as they traveled the countryside with him, encourage him to turn away from someone who has come to him for help. They, too, were Jews, probably concerned about his health and wellbeing, and their own. I’d be curious to know if he talked with them later about this incident! Surely it was a lesson for them as it is for us, to see Jesus listened to his heart and ignore those outside voices, reminding us of his words to Peter at another time, “get behind me, Satan.”

There are also lessons for us to learn from the Canaanite woman, who exhibited a great sense of urgency, fueled by courage. Her child was suffering, and as a loving parent she sought relief, refusing to take no for an answer. It’s apparent that she knew who Jesus was; she understood his power and authority, yet didn’t hold back in fear of him. I admire her perseverance and courage. I have never experienced her need and I can’t imagine or even understand how she felt. What I can do is remember that I’m called—we are called—to respond to people like her through our faith in Jesus Christ and the blessings we’ve received through him.

Today is the third time you and I have heard today’s lessons together. Six years ago, people in Germany were remembering the 50th anniversary of the building of the Berlin Wall, erected in a single night to keep people in East Berlin from escaping to freedom. That day, August 14, 2011, we remembered Jonathan Myrick Daniels, a 26 year-old white seminarian who died protecting a 16 year-old black girl during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. There was also widespread violence in England at that time, following the shooting of a man fleeing police. Three years ago, in 2014, the world watched in horror as Ysidi Christians in Mosul were slaughtered, threatening the end of a Christian community that lasted there for nearly two millennia. Only a few days earlier, all eyes were focused on Ferguson, Missouri after a young black man was shot by a white policeman. This past week, a young woman was killed when white supremacists and Neo-Nazis clashed violently with antiracism protesters. Our world is becoming more and more fragmented and dangerous. What are we to do about it?

The answer is in the teachings of our Lord, Jesus Christ, who commands us to love our neighbors as ourselves. It’s not coincidental that today’s lessons give us direction. We must always begin with prayer, seeking the guidance of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. What is God you to do and be in the challenges of our twenty-first century world? How is God calling us, as the body of Christ at St. Francis, to be the words and love of Jesus in our community? And of course, we must pray for the will and courage to answer God’s call, whatever it may be.

Let us pray.

This is another day, O Lord. I know not what it will bring forth, but make me ready, Lord, for whatever it may be. If I am to stand up, help me to stand bravely. If I am to sit still, help me to sit quietly. If I am to lie low, help me to do it patiently. And if I am to do nothing, let me do it gallantly. Make these words more than words, and give me the Spirit of Jesus. *Amen*.

ⁱ Aslan, Reza. *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*. Random House, New York. P. 131.