

Sermon for Sunday, August 20, 2017
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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There are some stories in the bible
which are profoundly disturbing. And today's gospel
is one of those.

It begins
innocently enough, as Jesus and his disciples
are walking through the countryside. It's not his usual territory: this time, he's left the
Jewish area, and is taking a short cut through land which traditionally belonged to the
Canaanites, the indigenous people of that area.
Nothing particularly unusual, nothing to get worried about.
It's about as normal, as innocent, as it can be, and once again someone
comes out to see Jesus.
a woman this time.

But things quickly
go sour. As Jesus and his disciples walk along, this woman
begins to shout at them.
"Have mercy on me, Lord, have mercy. My daughter is tormented. Have mercy on me!"
And the faster they walked, the more she shouts. "Have mercy on me, Lord, have mercy.
My daughter is tormented. Have mercy on me!"
And Jesus ignores her.
Jesus ignores her, when every other time we have on record, every other story in the New
Testament, it seems, he takes pity on the people
who call on him for help, he takes pity on them, no matter how inconvenient it is.
When he's exhausted, grieving for his executed cousin,
trying to have some time alone,
and the crowds come,
an he heals them
and feeds them.
Or the blind man, by the side of the road.
Jesus stops for him,
and for Zacchaeus the tax collector,
and for the ten lepers.
But this time
he just keeps on
walking.
No matter how much she shouts, Jesus keeps on walking.

Until, finally, his disciples can't stand it anymore. There's this woman caterwauling in the background, and they just want to get rid of her. "Jesus," they say. "Jesus, can't you just get send her away. Her shouting is making our heads hurt." And his answer? "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

There are times when you wonder what on earth Jesus thought he was doing. And this is one of them. His disciples want him to get rid of her; he says he doesn't want anything to do with her. It makes no sense.

But before that conversation could go any further, she takes matters into her own hands. She walks over, right in front of him, kneels on the ground, and asks for his help.

And this time Jesus has no choice. He can't just keep walking, because she's in his way. He has to answer her.

"It's not fair to take the children's food and give it to the dogs."

Can you imagine what that must have felt like? In effect he was saying, "My job is to go to the people of Israel. You're a foreigner. You don't belong. You're no more important than a stray dog."

She must have been devastated. Her last hope, this man, who was reputed to have the power to heal her daughter, who was supposed to be good, telling her she doesn't matter.

But she doesn't take him at his word, she doesn't let him get away with it. Jesus will not get rid of her

so easily. "Even dogs
get to eat the scraps from the table."

And then, for the first time, Jesus really speaks to her.
"Woman, great is your faith. Let it be done as you wish." And her daughter
was healed.

The story
has a happy ending,
but it's a disturbing story
all the same. Jesus' attitude
seems to be that his job
is only to reach out to the insiders, the people who are the right race, the chosen ones.
Everyone else? Well, they're just not his business.

And that suggests, in turn,
that God really, truly, under it all, has favorites. There are some people
who God really loves, and the rest of us, well, we can have
whatever is left over.

Now we can rationalize things, and say, you know,
you have to focus your efforts,
that one person can only do so much,
and that you have to prioritize.
Maybe that's what Jesus is saying here.

Except that's not good enough. Because it goes against everything else
we have heard about God,
all the talk of God's love being big enough for everyone,
of God loving the people who are the least powerful, of God loving the whole world so
much
that he gave his only Son for us.
And that Son, if we take this story seriously,
is a racist? Someone who is really only interested in a chosen few? And then who can be
swayed
by the clever answer of a woman?

I'm not sure this is a Jesus I want to know, someone who is biased, someone who can be
influenced by a few well chosen words. I want someone stronger, someone who knows

what he stands for and stands firm on it. I want someone I can depend on, someone who is totally reliable.

And that's not the Jesus of this story. Or is it?

Because no matter how he begins this conversation, where Jesus ends is by healing the woman's daughter, and by celebrating her faith. Even if she is an outsider.

And its just possible that what Jesus was doing was not being prejudiced, or biased, or perhaps worst of all, weak-minded, perhaps what Jesus was doing, had a particular purpose.

You see, the disciples,
 if you remember some of the stories about them, were nothing if not hard headed. They knew all their bible stories, knew that the people of Israel were chosen by God from way back, and that Canaanites, the indigenous people, had no place in God's plans. In fact, the Canaanites were dangerous -
 they led God's people astray, time and time again. So they would have wanted nothing better than to get rid of this woman, and get out of that place. It wouldn't have mattered how much Jesus argued with them, they knew what they believed was true. And so, perhaps Jesus knew that the only way they would be convinced is by an argument like this one, an argument where he himself played devil's advocate, and he himself as a representative of the people of God had to be persuaded of God's wider embrace.

Because in that conversation, what the disciples learned

was that faith was not confined
to their people, that faith
doesn't follow the categories of race or even religion.
That God touches people
from all over the place,
and draws from them faith,
and calls them into his love.

Which is a good thing
for us.

You see, if the disciples had their way,
only the people of Israel, only the Jews
would have been
the people of God,
only they
could have known Jesus.

But in Jesus's way, we all have a chance, those of us without Jewish ancestry
as well as those
with it;
all of us are people of God, drawn by love
into faith.

God doesn't play favorites.

God doesn't take sides.

God loves us all, regardless of our race, or our nationality, or our color, or anything else
that might divide us. God loves us all.

And that's a good thing, because otherwise, most likely, none of us
would have a chance with God.

But if that's the good side, there's also a difficult one.

Because if God doesn't play favorites, if God doesn't take sides,
then we

are just like everyone else. We are no less important, but we are no more
important, either. We have no special privileges.

And that's a hard thing to swallow. We live in a culture
where wealth and success
are valued and rewarded,
and we like to think

God is on our side.

But that's only true, if we are following
God's priorities.

If we are pursuing justice — for everyone,
no matter what skin color they are,
or what language they speak,
or where they live.

That means not playing games with our power,
not manipulating things to serve our own interests,
under the cover of safety or defense.

It means being committed
to the same standards of justice in our legal system
for rich and poor alike,
for citizen and non citizen alike.

It means being careful
of how all our decisions
impact on others with less power,
and being willing to listen to them.

I first wrote the first part of this sermon
fifteen years ago, when the United States
was in the early days of its involvement in Afghanistan,
when we were on the verge of war with Iraq,
when the second intifada meant constant conflict in the Holy Land.
And it is no less true today,
when the conflict is greatest here at home.

In a way, it was easier when it was all about what was happening overseas -
we could simply pray - though prayer was hard too, faced with Jesus' command to love
our enemies -
but we could pray.

But now
as we see increased tensions
around race and color and difficult history,
and people are dying,
here at home,
people are dying.

On Friday night
six police were shot,

two of them killed.

Our bishop sent out an email yesterday, asking us all to pray for them,
and for the safety of all our police.

In Charlottesville last week
while a group of right wing activists protested the removal of a Confederate memorial,
one person was killed
and many injured
when someone drove into a crowd of counter protesters,
who were simply claiming the full dignity
of every human being.

A young woman, Natalie,
the friend of a friend's daughter,
were seriously injured.

Natalie
comes from a low income family,
and made it to college on a scholarship.
She has no health insurance.

There is something wrong in our country, friends.
Not so much to do with politics
as with our own hearts.
Our society is ripping itself apart
and it needs healing.

And it's all too easy
to say, like Jesus' disciples did,
can't you just make it all go away?

No, says Jesus.
And he heals the woman's daughter.

And immediately afterwards,
finds more crowds, looking to be healed,
looking to be fed,
and when the disciples come to him saying there is no food,
and again, just like last tie,
he tells them to gather what there is,
and share it among the people,
and all are fed.

We have a society ripping itself apart,
hungry for healing.
And Jesus shows us
that God's mercy
is big enough for everyone,
big enough
for police,
and protesters
and counter protesters,
and everyone else,
but that God's vision for justice and freedom and love for all
can only be realized
with the help of the disciples of Jesus.
With our help.

And so, this week, pray.
Pray, and take action.
Help those who are vulnerable
feel safety.
Perhaps at the food pantry
make a special effort
to ask how clients are doing.
Maybe even ask
if they would like you to pray for them.
Reach out
to those who are at risk
who may be afraid.
Speak out
against hatred
and injustice.
And know,
know that God loves us.
And God's love
has room for everyone.