

Sermon, August 16, 2020

Good morning! Welcome to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and today we welcome back our good friends Marsh Mountain Consort for special music. I see they have added a new member recently who looks familiar. In fact, he is St. Mark's organist and all-around musical whiz Mike Borderick, also a member of the popular music group Aurora Celtic who will be here with us next week. Hi Mike! We are still waiting for a safe time to resume regular public worship. Pandemic cases and deaths are peaking nationally, and rising again in Maryland; and many, if not most of our members are either in a high-risk group, or they spend time with friends and family members who are.

We do not want to endanger anyone unnecessarily, so please bear with us. If you would like to help St. Mark's pay its bills and keep its mission and benevolence commitments during these difficult and unprecedented times, there is a secure Donate button on the church's website, which is stmarksoakland.com (no spaces or caps)

Now today's stupid joke.

My friend signed up with one of those on-line dating services. I asked how it was going and he said, "Not so well. They set me up with a lunch date last week, and the two of us talked and laughed and frankly I thought we were really hitting it off. But then when I asked for her number she said, "It's in the phone book." And I said, "But I don't know your address, or for that matter even your last name." And she said, "Well, they're in the phone book too."

Music

The Lord be with you. Let us pray.

God of all peoples, your arms reach out to embrace all those who call upon you. Teach us as disciples of your Son to love the world with compassion and constancy, that your name may be known throughout the earth, through Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord, Amen.

A reading from Isaiah, the fifty-sixth chapter.

Thus says the LORD: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant-- these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

Here ends the reading

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Matthew, the fifteenth chapter.

[Jesus] called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?"

He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if

one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us."

Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile." Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.

Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

The gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your Word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

According to former president George W. Bush, "If we don't succeed, we run the risk of failure." His famous father once said, "People say I'm indecisive, but I don't know about that."

Golfer Greg Norman told an interviewer, "I owe a lot to my parents, especially my mother and father."

And on seeing a camera close-up of the intense and intimidating stare of Chicago Bears Linebacker Mike Singletary during Super Bowl XX, the late Pat Summerall remarked, "If only faces could talk."

Yeah, we've all said dumb things, and it can be embarrassing. I should know-- I do it almost every week! And after reading today's gospel text, I couldn't help but wonder if the author of Matthew may have misspoken too.

Meanwhile, Miracle Month continues in our August Sunday gospel readings from the Revised Common Lectionary. Today's miracle is an exorcism, which happens to be my least favorite category of all. Why? My wife and several of our friends are Mental Health professionals, and thankfully we are two thousand years and half a world away from cultures that routinely attributed psychological and neurological disorders to the work of devils, demons and unclean spirits.

And I mean everything from addictions, psychoses and seizure disorders. More than five hundred fifty thousand dedicated health care professionals go to work every day in this country to help these people. But their patients and clients are still unfairly stigmatized for having illnesses that are no fault of their own. They do not deserve to have their health issues associated with evil.

Of course that's not the only thing about this gospel text that biblical scholars and cultural anthropologists for centuries have found troubling. You should know that Matthew's author is the **ONLY** New Testament author to use the term "Canaanite," and this is the only time he uses it. With good reason. I know, the word "Canaanite" shows up seventy-three times in the Hebrew Bible—our Old Testament--but virtually all of them are pejorative.

The way the Old Testament tells it, the Canaanites were Israel's worst enemy ever, but to be honest I've never really understood why. Enemies in Israel's early history included Philistines Egyptians, and Edomites. Later foes were the Assyrians, Babylonians, Macedonians, Seleucids, and Romans. And I understand all of those, because THEY WERE nations who at various times had invaded, occupied, slaughtered or enslaved neighboring Israel.

Not so much the Canaanites. They were an ancient indigenous Near Eastern people who, as best I can tell, pretty much minded their own business. Their only "sin" was living on the land that Israel believed God had promised to them. (I wonder--Does God really promise people land? There is certainly no shortage of nations and religions that seem to think so to this day. But that's another sermon...)

If you read Old Testament books like Joshua literally, as many do, then you believe God ordered the complete annihilation of not only innocent Canaanite men, but also women, children and even livestock. Why? Well they DID practice a different religion. But so did all those other enemies I mentioned, and at no point did God order the wholesale slaughter of them.

Problem is, the book of Genesis identifies Canaanites as descendants of Cana'an, the son of Ham who was the sinful youngest son of Noah. In Genesis chapter nine, Noah himself announced, "Cursed be Cana'an, lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers. Blessed by the Lord my God be Shem, and let Cana'an be his slave." (Well that's gotta hurt, coming from your own grampa.)

So in ancient Israelite history and tradition, their hatred of Canaanites appears to have been based mostly on ancestry, fueled by cultural bias and seasoned with a large dose of good old-fashioned racism. To Israel, Canaanites were the subhuman heathen of heathens, the great unwashed; destined by God to be slaves to the Shemites—or as we pronounce it today the Semites—who included the people of Israel.

The end of the book of Joshua would lead you to believe that the Israelites slaughtered every single one of them, just as God directed. But then if you read on into the Book of Judges, you'll soon discover, "Well, apparently not."

And in fact, recent genetic studies of today's Lebanese people show ninety percent of them carry DNA that is traceable to the ancient Canaanites, so some must have survived. And there are and have been some very fine native Lebanese people who I bet God wouldn't want us to slaughter either. Like Elissa, the beautiful and talented Lebanese singer, who is one of many Lebanese Christians. In fact, more than a third of the residents of Lebanon today are Christian, as are eighty percent of the ten to fourteen million members of the Lebanese Diaspora.

In fact, five Lebanese Christians have served as Popes of the Catholic Church. And don't forget one of my heroes, the devout Lebanese American Catholic named Amos Muzyad Yaqoob Kairuz, the great comedian, actor, singer, producer and philanthropist who founded the world's foremost childhood cancer and pediatric medical center. You know it as St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. And you knew him as Danny Thomas.

But by the first century world of Jesus and Matthew, there no longer WAS an identifiable race, religion, nationality, sect, bloodline or group who would self-identify as "Canaanites," and there hadn't been for centuries.

The Gospel of Mark told this story as well, a decade or two earlier. He described the woman as a Gentile, born in Syrophenicia. He never uses the "C" word.

So I don't really get why Matthew would apply the by-then- disparaging term Canaanite to a selfless faith-filled woman who was about to praise

and worship Jesus, bow at his feet and beg his help for her poor, sick daughter.

Of course there is one other disturbingly rude and insensitive character associated with today's story besides Matthew's author. That would be (Gulp) Jesus. Who to her face, as she knelt before him pleading for mercy, essentially called this woman a "dog." In the biblical world "dogs" were viewed with contempt. They were scavengers in the cities, roaming wild in packs that fed on animal flesh and sometimes human corpses. Dogs were unclean animals under Jewish law.

Paul referred to false apostles as "dogs." The Psalms equate them with evildoers. Revelation says "dogs" are the people who will be shut out of the kingdom of heaven. The Talmud said it was okay to kill a dog for no reason at all, even on the Sabbath. But ours is a different world, and hopefully one with a different worldview. No way would the God I know shut my Stella out of heaven. Heck, I bet he'll even let her on the couch.

For Jesus first to ignore, and then to label a poor and desperate foreign woman a "dog" sounds rude, inhumane, insensitive, racist and completely out of character to me. And after much consternation and reflection on the far too many social injustices in our world, including the killings of so many innocent and unarmed Black Americans over the last couple of years, I can't help but wonder if maybe this entire story was supposed to offend us.

At first glance the two halves of today's reading appeared to be unrelated. Yet the more I've thought about it, perhaps they aren't. What if, through his rude behavior and harsh words, Jesus was teaching something important to his disciples and followers by way of negative example. That is certainly an effective teaching tool. Remember, Jesus had just declared that evil is based in human hearts and the malice that comes out of human mouths. He lambasted Pharisees for their bias against the Jesus crowd, even calling THEM vile and vulgar. Crude

low-lives who didn't even wash their hands before they ate. Of course the REAL offense for the Pharisees was that the disciples of Jesus just DIDN'T look or think or act like Pharisees.

Jesus explained there's nothing wrong with being different. What defiles people are the evil things they do, the bigotry in their hearts and the malice on their lips. Such things will have no place in the coming kingdom. Frankly, I don't think they have much of a place in this one either.

So when Jesus first ignored and then insulted the Syro-Phoenician woman, and then Matthew added the racial slur, I can't help but think what they were really doing was holding up a mirror. A mirror in which the disciples, Matthew's first readers, and WE might see ourselves. Hoping that we won't like what we see. That harsh words, bad attitudes and blatant disrespect for ANY of the world's "Others" sure didn't look so good on Jesus. And they don't look any better on us.

Don't agree? Notice his surprising next move was, out of the blue, to praise the woman's faith and then heal her daughter. Making it clear that no, despite what he said earlier, Jesus was NOT sent ONLY to the Lost Sheep of Israel. And neither are we. We instead are called and sent to encounter and embrace all sorts of people.

From different places and different backgrounds. With different skin colors, worldviews, customs, lifestyles and religions. We are called and sent NOT to reject, judge or discriminate; but to help, feed and heal ALL who are in need.

To support and share with them the hope and promise of the Gospel, wherever and whenever we encounter them. And it's not always up to them to come and ask. Sometimes instead it is up to us, to go find 'em.

I admit, maybe I've got this all wrong. It won't be the first time, and probably not the last. Perhaps I'm reading into this story things that

really aren't there. And maybe Jesus, upon hearing this sermon will react like former New York Yankee great Yogi Berra, who wrote in his 1998 book, "I really didn't say everything that I said." But today I'm thinking, just maybe he did.

Amen.
