

11 Pentecost, Proper 15, Yr.A

August 20, 2017

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:10-20, 21-28

It's probably an understatement to say that we're living in challenging, chaotic and anxious times. But I think we can see that there's a possibility of blessing for us in spite of all the angst. And that's because some things that have been festering in the darkness are now out in the sunlight, where they can be named for what they are and addressed. And there's another blessing here, following the events in Charlottesville – and that is that there's absolutely no moral ambiguity about the questions raised in those events – racism is wrong, white supremacy is wrong, Nazism is wrong. Sometimes we're caught in dilemmas where we can get lost and confused because there are cogent arguments on both sides. This is not one of those times. One political cartoon showed a politician looking at men making a Nazi salute and saying, "I bet they're hailing a taxi." Maybe not. Desmond Tutu, talking about all the ills and sins of the world says that at least we know when something is wrong and he uses the situation we just witnessed as an example. "...the fact of the matter," he says, "is that anybody standing up and saying, "I support Nazism" would soon have most of the world turn against him. And I think he's been proven correct. We fought WWII against those poisonous ideas and veterans of that war are among those speaking out.

So, where do we go from here? The first step is to name the evil for what it is. Racism is wrong. And while we need to understand the vision and motivation of those supporting it, our first step should be to articulate our OWN vision. What do Christians believe about this? What are we called to witness to by our lives? I'm going to quote Tutu again here, from his book, *God Has a Dream*:

"I have a dream," says God. "It is a dream of a world whose ugliness and squalor and poverty, its war and hostility, its greed and harsh competitiveness, its alienation and disharmony are changed into their glorious counterparts, when there will be more laughter, joy and peace, where there will be justice and goodness and compassion and love and caring and sharing... My children will know that they are members of one family, the human family...My family." And then Tutu goes on to say, "In God's family, there are no outsiders. All are insiders. Black and white, rich and poor, gay and straight, Jew and Arab, Palestinian and Israeli, Roman Catholic and Protestant, Serb and Albanian, Hutu and Tutsi, Muslim and Christian, Buddhist and Hindu, Pakistani and Indian – all belong."

Tutu's vision, and ours as well, is primarily formed by scripture. And today's scriptures seem ready made for what we're currently experiencing. Because all of them grapple with the problem that seems to be as old as humanity – the insider/outsider dilemma. Isaiah is addressing it and saying that salvation is about how one lives – it's about righteousness and justice, not about all the lines we draw around ethnicity, cult or nationality. And Paul is dealing with the same thing in this part of Romans. He's talking to Christians who felt that the Jews must surely have been superseded in God's love since they rejected Christ. No way, says Paul – the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable. You were once outsiders, but now you're included. So don't be smug, just be grateful.

And then there's the reading from Matthew. First there's that discussion about what defiles a person. That's coming out of a long-standing traditional understanding of the clean/unclean distinction which was a supporting pillar of the Judaism of Jesus' time. We come in just after the Pharisees are asking Jesus why the disciples aren't washing their hands before eating. It's important to remember that this isn't about hygiene – instead it's about being in a proper condition to come into the presence of God, to be fit for worship. Under the oral law, which was developed over the centuries by commentaries on the Torah, which was the written law, contact with certain persons or things could make you unclean. Gentiles were unclean, for instance. And because in the course of an ordinary day you could unwittingly come into contact with something or someone that rendered you unclean, the tradition had developed an elaborate system of washing. While this might sound trivial to us, it wasn't to an observant Jew. It was a serious matter. In answering, Jesus points out other examples where ritual could conflict with God's intent. So, for instance, the commandments demanded that a person honor their parents, but the oral law allowed a person to tell his needy parents that all his worldly goods were dedicated to God and that therefore, he was exempt from helping them.

“Don't you see?” Jesus is saying. It's possible to use the rules, the rituals, and the traditions, to undercut God's intentions. Compassion and kindness will always trump outward rules and ritual observances. It's not what goes into your mouth that defiles you, it's what comes out in your speech and actions that show what's in your heart and mind. And then, right on cue, in comes an outsider, the Canaanite woman. And it's not just any woman, which would be bad enough, but it's a Canaanite, someone from the ancestral enemies of the Jews. One very legitimate way of reading this text is that it shows Jesus growing into a wider understanding of both God and of what Jesus is being called to do. While he hesitates at first, no doubt doing the mental calculus, his understanding of God wins in the end and he responds to her, not out of some exclusionary theology, but out of that understanding of the expansive, all-inclusive heart of his Father.

Jesus would have known about these insider/outsider issues first hand. He lived in a highly polarized world: Roman conquerors/Jewish subjects, Jews divided among themselves into Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots and Essenes, Jews divided from Gentiles and Samaritans. And then there were the men/women division, and the rich/poor division. When Matthew was writing his Gospel, which is thoroughly Jewish in character, the original identity of the first Christian communities was changing. Now Gentiles were coming into the church and, to some, that meant that these outsiders were diluting that original identity. Hence all those arguments, which again seem strange to our ears, about circumcision – those arguments were about identity – these Gentiles have to become JEWS before they can join us.

So, scripture – which comes down on the side of inclusion. But then, as Episcopalians, we also have our baptismal covenant, in which we promise to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, to strive for justice and peace among all people and to respect the dignity of every human being.

With those firm foundations to stand upon, we can then take some further steps. One must certainly be to try to understand the perceptions and motivations of those white supremacists, because they too are our brothers. What drives them? Fear of difference? Fear of loss,

whether of economic status or status in general? Maybe it's simply scapegoating: I can't get my life together so it must be someone's fault: the Jews, or the blacks, or the deep state. And, insofar as they have legitimate grievances, we should try to address them. One wonders about their experiences – what brought them to this point, where they were willing to use speech and symbols of hate as well as weapons, to intimidate others.

Jim Wallis has written a book titled *American's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege and the Bridge to a New America*. In that book, he talks about loving musicals when he was growing up and he remembers especially South Pacific. In that musical, the characters are struggling with racial issues. One of the songs is "You've Got to be Carefully Taught." The song explains that racial prejudice isn't innate but learned and says:

"You've got to be taught to be afraid/ of people whose eyes are oddly made/and people whose skin is a different shade/you've got to be carefully taught. You've got to be taught before it's too late/before you are six or seven or eight/to hate all the people your relatives hate/ you've got to be carefully taught."

Wallis goes on to say that what's been learned has to be unlearned. That means, first of all, examining our own consciences to see what biases we labor under and then doing what we can to witness against exclusion, whether that's by voting or in conversations with friends, or in how we educate our children and grandchildren.

There's a story about a fellow who was host to a Rabbi from Moscow one Christmas. To treat the rabbi to a dining experience not available in his own country, he took him to his favorite Chinese restaurant. After a good meal and pleasant conversation, the waiter brought the check and gave each person at the table a small brass Christmas ornament as a complimentary gift. Everyone laughed when one of the guests turned him over and read the label that said it had been made in India. And then everyone stopped laughing because they noticed tears on the Rabbi's cheeks. The host asked if the rabbi was offended at having been given a gift on a Christmas holiday. The rabbi shook his head and said, "No I was shedding tears of joy to be in such a wonderful country in which a Chinese Buddhist restaurant owner gives a Russian Jew a Christmas gift made by a Hindu in India." That is, I think, a picture of what makes our country what it is. What we have is fragile and we can't be complacent about it.

And, finally, a prayer:

O God, we seek your forgiveness for the numerous injustices around us, for our inability to create a world of equality. We pray for a deepening to our commitment to justice, for the ability to reflect on the many ways in which we offend people of other creeds, of the opposite sex, of other nations. Above all we ask for the courage to stand up as witness-bearers for justice, though this sometimes be against ourselves. Amen. (*Prayers for Hope and Comfort*, edited by Maggie Shannon)