**August 17, 2014 – 10th Sunday after Pentecost**

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Let me just tell you how tempting it was to just talk about Paul’s letter to the Romans today, and avoid this oh-so-confusing Gospel. After all, Paul is talking about God’s gifts and calling, once offered, being irrevocable, and how God is infinitely merciful even when we’re disobedient. Good stuff! Sermon fodder if ever I heard it!

But Matthew offers us the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman, which is one of the trickiest ones in the lectionary. And we’ll get it again, about a year from now, when we’re reading Mark. Thankfully, this story doesn’t appear in Luke and John!

But tempting as it is, to leave this story untalked about is to let a particularly large elephant into your living room. So here goes.

To reiterate the story – Jesus fed the 5,000, walked on water, stilled the storm, and has just told the Pharisees their business regarding what defiles a person. I’m kind of sorry the Lectionary committee included that bit with today’s Gospel, because I think it would make a dandy sermon all on its own. But I’m keeping the elephant in mind here.

So after a fairly busy couple of days, Jesus and his disciples withdraw to the region of Tyre and Sidon. Tyre is a port city about 30ish miles to the northwest of Genessaret on the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus and the disciples landed after that stormy night. It’s in a region that was called Phoenicia, which is now modern day Lebanon.

Neither Matthew nor Mark records why they left the familiarity and relative safety of Genessaret, which was comfortably in the middle of their home base of Galilee. It could be that Jesus had pushed the Jewish authorities a bit too far and the area got a little hot for them. However, as getaway destinations go, Phoenicia isn’t exactly an easy commute from the Sea of Galilee. It may be only 30 miles as the crow flies, but there’s a small range of mountains in between so human beings had to follow the roads, making it a considerably longer trip.

It could be they chose that area because the region of Tyre and Sidon was a pagan, Gentile area, so it was probably certain that the Pharisees wouldn’t follow them there. We just don’t know. Another strange thing about this geographical choice is that both Matthew and Mark write that Jesus did exactly one thing there – encounter this Syro-Phoenician, or Canaanite, woman – before heading right back to the Sea Galilee to pick up where they left off. It’s a strange interlude, certainly.

So now we come to the actual elephant. In both Matthew and Mark, the woman is not named or closely identified. In Mark’s version of this story, she’s merely called a Syro-phoenician woman, referring to her being a resident of that region. The Province of Syria was the Roman designation for the area that occupies approximately what modern Syria occupies now, plus the ancient region of Phoenicia, now Lebanon, as I said. Hence the name Syro-phoenician.

But Matthew refers to her by her ethnic name, Canaanite. This is significant because the Canaanites were not only Gentiles and pagains, but they were also the ancient enemies of the Israelites. Matthew’s audience was primarily Jewish, so this would have resonated very strongly with them. It would be like telling a story of a Hatfield coming up to a McCoy and yelling at him, only on an ethnic-wide level.

So as Jesus and his disciples were walking along, up runs this Gentile woman, screaming. The word that the NRSV translates as shouting here is “*kradzo*,” which means to scream, cry out, or shriek. Shouting barely covers this. This is World Series, Game Seven, Bottom of the Ninth, screaming, the kind that your vocal cords and throat don’t recover from quickly. This woman was desperate!

But Jesus ignores her. It’s not surprising – she’s a Gentile (unclean), a woman (unclean), and clearly out of her mind (REALLY unclean). What else could he do? But I can’t help but think that WHAT she said might have gotten his attention a little bit – she, who is from a land and a race who would have no reason to do so, calls him “Lord, Son of David.”

The nuisance factor and the sheer volume certainly bugged the disciples, though. “Send her away,” they said to Jesus, “because she keeps shouting after us.”

Then comes what I think is a really interesting part of this story. The text says, “He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."” It doesn’t say WHOM he was answering. Was it the woman? Was it the disciples? Was he answering God?

He may have hesitated or stopped at this point. Or somehow she sped up and got in front of him. However it worked out, she got down on her knees in front of him and again called him, “Lord.” The word for kneeling here is “*proskuneo*,” which does mean to kneel, but to kneel in worship – almost to kiss someone’s feet. Remember, this was a Gentile woman – she would have no reason to call him “Lord,” or to kneel in front of him. Yet, here she was, kneeling and begging him for her child’s life.

And still Jesus is waffling. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," he says. Frankly, Jesus doesn’t come off as a very nice guy in this moment. A lot of people, including some noted New Testament scholars, have tried to pass this off as a joke on Jesus’ part, because the word for dog that’s used here really means “little dog” or “house pet.” In other words, they would love to believe that he really wasn’t calling her a dog, which would have been a terrible insult in that culture.

But it won’t work. He said dog and he mostly likely meant dog. Even a little dog is still a dog. And he clearly says that the Jews are to the Canaanites as children of a household are to the housepets. Although we profess all the time that Jesus is completely human as well as completely divine, I think we secretly hope that Jesus would escape some of the nastier things that being human entails. Things like racism, and intolerance, and unwillingness to change.

But that’s what’s so cool about this story. Jesus DOES change. He changes his mind, and he changes the whole course of his ministry from that moment forward. Whether he was having this conversation with that woman, or with himself, or with his Father, the conversation, along with her obvious faith, causes him to change the narrow, Jews-only focus of his ministry to a wider one that includes everyone else. In some ways, it’s as much of a miracle as the long-distance exorcism of the Canaanite woman’s daughter which follows. Maybe more.

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As I was writing this sermon, I was inundated by news stories of what’s going on in Ferguson, Missouri right now, and other, similar news stories that are pretty upsetting. Although the Ferguson story is more recent and ongoing, another story that particularly affected me was the killing of Eric Garner, a 43 year old African-American man from Staten Island, a couple of weeks ago. Obviously, none of us can really understand why this tragedy happened that day – what led up to it, or what was in peoples’ hearts and minds. All we know for sure is that a black man was killed by a police officer who put a choke-hold put on him and held it until that man died.

A couple of days ago, I saw a video of a peaceful protest about this event, staged in front of the Times Square police station by a large crowd of actors and musicians. I was fine watching the video until the very end where there was a recording of Eric Garner’s voice crying out, “I can’t breathe, I can’t breathe, I can’t breathe!” I still can’t get that voice out of my mind.

The two stories are similar – today’s Gospel and Eric Garner’s. They both depict a person with no power on the ground in front of a person who has power over them. That person on the ground is crying out and begging – the Canaanite woman for her daughter, and Eric Garner for his life. The difference is that Jesus uses his power to help the Canaanite woman, but Eric Garner is killed without mercy.

(Pause to breathe…)

If, as I believe, the very human Jesus changes and grows more merciful during this encounter with the Canaanite woman, and if, as I believe, we should follow in the path that Jesus has laid out for us to walk in, what should we do with Eric Garner’s story and similar incidents? How should we react? How MUST we react?

One thing’s for sure – we can’t sit around and do nothing. Sometimes, and thankfully so, Huron seems so far away from this kind of horrific injustice, just like it’s so far away from the events that are going on in Ferguson, Missouri, following the police shooting of an unarmed black teenager named Michael Brown.

But, removed as we are, we still have to do something. We have to stop racism, bigotry, and fear from turning our country into a police state. And we can’t stand by and let people with power harm or kill those whom they have power over. Not just because this IS going to come here to Huron eventually, and not just because, at some point in the future, we could all be the powerless ones, begging for our lives.

We have to act to change this because it’s the right thing to do. Because it’s what Jesus would do. Because we are the Body of Christ, it’s up to us to stop injustice, maybe even with our very lives. Because Jesus did that, too.

Sadly, this where the exhorting part of the sermon ends. Frankly, for all I believe that we have to act, I don’t know HOW! My heart is breaking over this and I don’t know how to fix it, where to start. But, luckily, one thing I DO know is that none of us has to go it alone. As I’ve said so many times, we are meant to work together in community to proclaim the Gospel of peace. Together we can stand up against the injustices and the abuses of power wherever we see them happening, especially here in our own home town and state. As Paul said in Romans a couple of weeks ago – if God is for us, who is against us?

We need to work together, with God’s help and guidance, to stop this madness!

Of course, as you might expect, many, many people have been writing about these terrible events on the Internet. A lot of it is formless anger and despair, or even bigotry and hatred disguised as reason, but there are two things I’d like to share from some people I greatly respect.

The first was posted by Diana Butler Bass, a theologian from Washington, although she didn’t compose it. It’s the text of a hymn from the monastery in Iona, Scotland, based on a speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.:

“I have a dream”, a man once said,

“where all is perfect peace;

where men and women, black and white,

stand hand in hand, and all unite

in freedom and in love.”

But in this world of bitter strife

the dream can often fade;

reality seems dark as night,

we catch but glimpses of the light

Christ sheds on humankind.

Fierce persecution, war, and hate

are raging everywhere;

God calls us now to pay the price

through struggles and through sacrifice

of standing for the right.

So dream the dreams and sing the songs,

but never be content:

for thoughts and words don’t ease the pain:

unless there’s action, all is vain;

faith proves itself in deeds.

Lord, give us vision, make us strong,

help us to do your will;

don’t let us rest until we see

your love throughout humanity

uniting us in peace.

And finally, I want to close with a prayer posted yesterday by Mike Kinman, who is the Dean of the Cathedral in St. Louis, and who’s been walking with the people of Ferguson, Missouri. I hope that this prayer, or one like it, is being said across the whole country today, and that our prayers will effect change.

Let us pray.

Most holy and loving God, send a spirit of peace into the hearts of your people, but let it be a restless peace. Let it be a peace restless and unsatisfied with easy answers. Let it be a peace restless and goading us to the hard work of loving deeply. Let it be a peace restless enough to not be satisfied with the catharsis of violence but craving a deeper reparation that can only come when truth is told, sin is confessed and life is amended. Let that peace begin with each and all of us. Let it start in this St. Louis region and spread across this nation and around the world. That all may know the peace that heals and restores all creation. The Peace of Christ.

Amen.