

Sunday Devotion

August 16, 2020

Find a quiet place by yourself or with another and come to God.

This week's devotion was written by Nathaniel Brantingham, Director of Campus Ministry at United Church Fellowship, University of Illinois and former Seminary Intern of Forest Grove

If you are able, join us for worship on Sunday at 10:00:
<https://zoom.us/j/127591875> Meeting ID: 127 591 875 or by phone: 301-715-8592 or 253-215-8782.



HYMN SING

#1 Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!

1. Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee.
Holy, holy, holy! merciful and mighty!
God in three persons, blessed Trinity!

2. Holy, holy, holy! all the saints adore thee,
Casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea;
Cherubim and seraphim falling down before thee,
Who wert, and art, and evermore shalt be.

#14 For the Beauty of the Earth

1. For the beauty of the earth, for the glory of the skies,
for the love which from our birth over and around us lies:
Lord of all, to thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise.

5. For thyself, best gift divine to the world so freely given;
for that great, great love of thine, peace on earth and joy in heaven:
Lord of all, to thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Dear Lord, be with us as we gather for worship this morning!

Bind our hearts close together in ways we cannot be physically, as much as we may long for it.

Gather up in your arms which know no limits, reaching far to pull us into one body.

From the beautiful farmlands of Pennsylvania.

To the storm wet plains of Illinois.

And out to each, no matter where we are at, bring us together here as one today.

OPENING PRAYER

God, nurture us when we need nurturing. Care for us when we need cared for. Heal us when we need healing. Challenge us when we need awakening. Show us grace when we need mercy. And above all else, love us as we need your loving. Amen.

HYMN #692 Spirit, Open My Heart

CALL TO CONFESSION

The Lord is not mean-spirited or vengeful. God is gracious and merciful, always willing to listen to our prayers, and to hear our hearts. Let us join in the prayer for forgiveness admitting to our brokenness.

PRAYER OF BROKENNESS

The prophet Isaiah quotes the LORD saying, "Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come and my deliverance be revealed." But we are worn down, O God. We are broken from that which breaks within us, and broken in response to that which breaks around us. We are hurting because we want clean solutions for messy problems. We are hurting because just as often we want messy solutions for clear problems. We hurt because sometimes those solutions ask so much of us and we are so tired and feel so broken and helpless. Hear our prayers, O Lord.

WORDS OF GRACE AND FORGIVENESS

God did not promise that this would be easy. But God did promise to walk the journey with us. Christ did promise to be our shepherd on the journey. The tasks seem mighty, but we forget sometimes that God is mightier still and we do not need to do this work alone. Even when distance is required, we are not alone. Even with church buildings are closed, church is still bringing us together. "Virtual" worship makes it sound like an illusion, but I am still here. You are still here. God is still here. We are here together in this Body of Christ able to reach across untold distances to share this good news: You are loved by God above! And by God above you are forgiven!

FIRST SCRIPTURE LESSON Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

56:1 Thus says the LORD: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. ⁶And 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--

⁷these 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.

⁸Thus says the Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

TIME WITH THE CHILDREN

SECOND SCRIPTURE LESSON Matthew 15:10-28

15:10 Then [Jesus] called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: ¹¹it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles."

¹²Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?"

¹³He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit."

¹⁵But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us."

¹⁶Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

²¹Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²²Just 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."

²³But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us."

²⁴He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

²⁵But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."

²⁶He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

²⁷She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

²⁸Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

SERMON

This longer passage has two seemingly unconnected sub passages. Let's start with the easier of the two sections, the first part which sounds very classic Jesus. In this section Jesus is making a case to listeners that the Pharisees' theologies are incorrect, and in this case specifically about purity codes regarding what foods to eat. As you know from many readings, what someone is allowed to eat or not is often a matter of fierce debate in ancient Hebrew times. The Pharisees' maintain that strict adherence to the purity codes is essential to avoid being defiled, unclean, or sinful. Jesus is arguing that focusing on what goes into the mouth as that which defiles (or causes sin) is incorrect, it is instead what comes out of the mouth which defiles. This turning on its head decentralizes personal choice and personal action and instead centralizes interaction and community. It becomes how we interact and harm others that is important, not a strict regimen of personal piety. This, to me, rings true. It fits with my understanding of Jesus, theology, and how we are to treat others. However, the second part of the lectionary reading is far harder to come to terms with, especially when set side by side to the first.

Here, a mere eight verses later, it is like Jesus forgot what he just said about what defiles and makes two deeply troubling statements. The first is a theological claim: that Jesus was sent only for the lost sheep of Israel. This should cause us great anxiety. Does this mean that salvation is not for us? The second is a personal statement, where Jesus, in talking to an unaccompanied foreign woman, refers to her and her racial group as "dogs." This does not mesh with how I understand Jesus to operate. We are going to dig into it further, but for now, I want to give you an out. If, at any time, this dive into two very troubling statements causes too much consternation, I want to say up front that it is possible that Jesus was just using this as a teaching moment. Sometimes teachers say things not strictly true or what they personally believe in order to show the wrong way and then correct it to show us the right way. Perhaps that is all that is happening here and the scripture just didn't record the rest of that teaching moment. There is some support for this. The statements aren't terribly consistent with the Jesus we know from other verses, and the placement next to the defiling statements seems to indicate that this is an illustration of the principle just explained.

But, if that isn't what is going on here, we have to ask some difficult questions because only eight verses separate two conflicting statements which makes Jesus look like a hypocrite. I mean, didn't Jesus just say that it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles, and then what comes out of his mouth, but vile name calling? And there's no comfort here in the language. Calling someone or a group of people dogs or animals then meant the same as it does now. It dehumanizes and is meant to make often minority groups into "others" and "less than." This woman is unaccompanied and thus quite possibly unmarried or widowed. She's a foreigner. She is absolutely the lowest of the low on the totem pole. And she is desperate for Jesus, a renowned teacher and healer, to help save her tormented daughter. And in response to her desperate pleas Jesus calls her a dog while closing off any hope for salvation for you or me as well. I just can't get over it.

We hold this theological idea that Jesus is perfect. In fact he must be perfect for the theology of Paul. But the problem with perfection is that to be perfect you must never stumble, even a tiniest misstep. Every word you say, every action you take MUST in every sense of the word, be perfect. Down to the breath you take. Every breath must be the best breath ever taken, because if not, couldn't a theoretical alternate reality include that better breath and thus be more perfect? This isn't just word games, it's exhaustingly impossible, but it is what we expect from Jesus. The other part of the problem is that anyone who is perfect cannot improve. They are already perfect, so no improvement is possible, no modeling of improvement is possible. This makes it really hard for Jesus to be a role model for imperfect people because we just cannot live up to that perfect standard and in failing, we don't have a role model to teach us how to handle that failure.

But what if Jesus could still be Jesus and still fail from time to time? We actually have some room for this too, because a lot of the time when Paul talks about Jesus being perfect he writes it as a verb, in terms of being perfected, being made perfect. It may be that perfection is a process, and if so, there is room for stumbling on the way and this means we can learn from that stumble and improve. Our salvation, quite literally in this sense, depends on it, since the door was closed on us. But, it appears, that here, in this passage, Jesus changes his mind, something that should be impossible for a perfect person to do.

And who changed his mind? A woman. A foreign woman. A widowed, or unwed foreign woman with a sick daughter. A fierce woman who took Jesus' insult and held it up for him to see. He calls her a dog and she essentially says back, "And so what if I am? You call me names, but so what? Call me whatever you want, but are you going to heal my daughter or not?" And here in this response there is room in the scripture for us to read a large gasp. And then Jesus models restoration. He moves right past empty words or empty symbols and sees her, maybe for the first time as a human being. And he sees her strength and resilience and determination and he names all that "faith" and says, "Woman (not dog now, but woman), great is your faith." He sees her strengths and her value and her gifts and names it. Then he moves straight into restitution through action and simply says, "let it be done for you as you wish." And it was done and her daughter was healed.

What is driving me crazy about this passage isn't just what Jesus said. It is that this woman is the heroine of the story, and if it wasn't for her changing Jesus' mind, the doors to salvation may have stayed closed for gentiles. All of my life trying to be like Jesus and in this one passage where I really DON'T want to be like Jesus, NOW I see myself in his position. The gut wrenching moment when someone calls you out for something you said and you know they are right and you shouldn't have said that thing, when you resonate with what Jesus said eight versus prior about what defiles and you feel dirty... I've felt that.

In the church I am at now they have a book club, and the book they are reading right now is Ibram X Kendi's How to be an Antiracist. It is a book that is capturing a lot of people's attention right now, and it is very good. One of the main points of the book is changing how people talk about racism. Dr. Kendi says that "racist" isn't a description for a person, like the way we talk about the stereotypical racist uncle at Thanksgiving, but instead is a term to describe actions or policies. An action or a policy can be racist, but not a person. This allows us to talk about the times when we have said or done things which are racist without it naming us, or defining us. And all of us have, even Dr. Kendi says that he has had racist thoughts and done racist things. It's all around us, impossible to avoid it. And so we need to recognize it when it happens, or when we get called out for it, and as hard as that is to do, we must change. We must be like Jesus at the end, and recognize the beautiful humanity in all of its diversity around us and then we must take direct actions to change the situation. It is painful when it happens, of course. No one likes to hear that they have been insensitive or wronged someone because of their racial identity. We don't like to realize that we did something bad. As someone who has also said the wrong thing before and hurt someone with what comes out of my mouth and it's a horrible feeling. And sometimes it hurts so bad that we don't want to own it, or fix it, and we would rather just deny that anything bad was said at all, or double down on our mistake. But if Jesus can say something that is, let's face it, racist. And then if he can realize it, correct it, and allow it to radically change his theology and mission and life, then maybe we can to. Maybe we need to. Maybe I need to.

It is a tall ask, but we owe it to this unnamed, brave, fierce, foreign woman with the sick daughter to try. After all, she went to bat for us, and all of human history changed. It was in her spirit that the Apostles were there to hear this story had those fateful conversations after Jesus' death to discuss inclusion of the gentiles. And it is because of this that God's will that ALL might be saved became possible. So thanks be to God for this woman! And thanks be to God that Jesus models for us, not how to BE perfect, but how to be perfected. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God, in your mercy and sheltered within your grace and unflagging love, we lift the prayers, the joys, and concerns of this community to you. In this time we especially lift up prayers for health and healing, both within this congregation and without. We pray for families and communities harmed by racial violence and injustice. We pray for the nation as it enters into a difficult political season and for families and neighbors that they can weather the storms of disagreement. Guide us all to hope, to justice, and to your Kingdom. Hear our prayers, comfort us, celebrate with us, and be with us, this day and always. Amen.

JOYS AND CONCERNS

HYMN #769 For Everyone Born

BENEDICTION

The Spirit sends us forth to love and to serve. Go in peace, knowing that God, even with challenge, makes way a path that God intends to walk with us. You are not alone, even when we are distant, and you are loved by the Lord God who made all things, sustains all things, and protects all things. Go in love and peace!