

## Healing our past

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Hingham, Massachusetts, on the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, August 16, 2020.

*Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."*

Matthew 15:28

This morning we find Jesus teaching on the shores of the Mediterranean, somewhere between the coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon. Out from the midst of the crowd comes a woman from Canaan who is pleading for her daughter to be healed of the torments of a demon. What was then called demon possession would today be diagnosed as a mental disorder that can be treated with medication and therapy.

The interaction between Jesus and the Canaanite woman is difficult to reconcile with what we know of his compassionate nature. At first, he ignores the mother's plea. He then tells her that he was *sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*. (Matthew 15:24) This is a reference to the people of Israel avoiding Canaanites because of their worship of false gods and idols. Not to be put off, the mother kneels before Jesus and persists in pleading for her daughter to be healed. Jesus then tells her, *it isn't fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs*. (Matthew 15:26) Now if you are put off by his reaction, the centerpiece of this story is her quick-witted response, *Yes Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table*. (Matthew 15:27) Canaanites and other Gentiles were thought of as "dogs" because they were like puppies in Jewish households that gathered up the crumbs that fell from the master's table.

If Jesus appears to be uncharacteristically insensitive, it is his way of testing her. Because of her strong faith and persistence, she succeeds in having her daughter healed. The remarkable thing about the Canaanite woman's faith is that she is willing to endure any challenge, any test for her daughter to be healed. Her quick wit and strong faith transcends religious and ethnic differences. This story serves to remind us of the ongoing deep-seated prejudices based on fear and ignorance. While we have made advances in understanding and accepting people of diverse origins, we have lost ground in overcoming the evils of racial injustice.

A good place to begin is to understand that we are all part of the human race and share the same human needs for acceptance, dignity and respect. The Black Lives Matter movement has heightened our awareness that Black lives have not mattered. It is time to reject the long history of white supremacy that defended slavery justified on grounds of economic necessity. I am a great-grandson of men who were on opposite sides the Civil War. One of them was a surgeon in the Confederate army and the other a courier in the Union army. After that bloody conflict, even though the Emancipation Proclamation abolished the institution of slavery, succeeding generations of African Americans were kept in subjugation and systematically denied the advantages of an education, economic opportunity and the right to vote.

As a student, I questioned the attitudes and assumptions of previous generations. A turning point in my life was to be in the March on Washington led by Dr. King in 1963. At first, we stood on the curb watching the marchers advance down Constitution Avenue on their way to the Lincoln Memorial. As I stepped off the sidelines to join the marchers it was a moment of transition from being a passive observer to active involvement in the movement for justice. Dr. King's dream was that "people would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

What I came to realize is that we have the choice to be part of the problem or part of the solution by refusing to accept the status quo. The plain fact is that unless all of us are free, none of us is. My generation has seen the desegregation of public schools, department stores, lunch counters, restaurants, and other public facilities. The Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act were intended to make a more just society, but it takes more than laws to change racist minds and attitudes. In 1965, the killing of a seminary classmate working for voter registration in Selma, Alabama had a profound effect on me. Later on, it was a learning experience for me as a white priest in an African American congregation with an African American bishop. What I learned is that we have to be completely honest with ourselves about our own inner prejudices. Today, the forces of white supremacy have reemerged to push back against African Americans and immigrants from taking their rightful place in American society. While it may have looked as though we had made great strides, we were fooling ourselves if we thought we were living in a post racist society.

Like many of you during this time of quarantine, I am reaching out to friends and family by phone. In a recent conversation I was asked a haunting question: *Where is God in all this?* Where is God when people of color cannot walk down the street without being questioned, or go into a store without being followed or told to go back to Africa? Where is God in the pandemic of a virus that causes so much suffering and death? This begs the larger age-old question of why there is evil in the world. It's not fair that good people suffer and bad people prosper. The stark reality is that life isn't fair and was never meant to be. At the heart of racism are sin and the misuse of our gift of free will. The more difficult question is why people suffer from sickness and disease. This can only be answered with the understanding that it is part of the natural order of God's created universe.

It is my profound belief that God's love for us is greater than anything that can happen to us. Rather than abandoning or forsaking us, God provides us with strength and courage to endure any evil power. God's healing power is seen in the advances in medical science and research to find a means to eradicate the effects of a pandemic disease. In the same way, God acts through those who work to eliminate the evils of racism. Archbishop Desmond Tutu tells us that, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you are taking the part of the oppressor." That is why a fair justice system must never be thought of as "just us."

My friends, there is work to be done. We must never give in, never ever give up.