

Sermon August 20, 2017

May God's grace, and mercy and peace be with you this day. Amen

Dogs. I am an unabashed dog lover. Actually, I am crazy about all kinds of pets – cats, fish, rabbits, hamsters, turtles, parakeets– I have had all of them– I tried to get Nancy to say yes to a house pig but she drew the line at house pigs – I like all the animals but dogs the best. I have had 3 dogs in my life – all Heinz 57 breeds, great companions, great fun.

When we lived in Hampstead, one of our neighbors was from Algeria and she confided to me that there was absolutely no way she could allow her dog Falco, another cute Heinz 57 with the biggest floppiest ears I have seen on a dog, there was no way, she told me, that she could allow a dog into her house. Despite her husband's protests, Falco was kept in the garage. I didn't share with her that our dog Augie commandeered the family room sofa and would sneak into bed with me when I took a nap. I share this story of my neighbor because it is much closer to the way dogs were viewed and treated during Jesus' time. Dogs were not beloved family members, doted on and groomed and provided medical treatment. When's the last time you saw a dog house?

In Jesus time dogs were mongrels, ran in packs, were known for eating dead bodies. They were held in the lowest esteem and there are references in

both the Hebrew Bible and other parts of the New Testament that associate dogs with evil. So, when Jesus says it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs – this is clearly a degrading insult. It seems that Jesus is being disrespectful and showing absolutely no compassion. He ignores the heart-rending plea of this desperate woman seeking healing for her sick daughter.

There are two widely held interpretations of this story. The first Jesus is not insulting the woman, he is merely testing her faith. But the words "testing" or "feigning" are not in the text. Is there any hint that Jesus is winking, and smiling, I am just provoking her to see how she responds? Looking at all the rest of the gospel stories, we might imagine Jesus testing the faith of some self-righteous, pompous Pharisee or Sadducee or some person of privilege or power but to test a frantic woman whose child is tormented? Is Jesus modeling for us modern-day disciples that this is how we are to go about responding to pleas for help – ignore, insult? Is that how we promote faith?

The better interpretation, in my mind, is that Jesus is not testing her, but she is challenging his cultural prejudices. What you say, our Lord Jesus, prejudice? Hold up, what does it mean when we say that Jesus is fully divine and fully human. If Jesus was fully human, does that mean that Jesus had nothing to

learn. He came out of the womb speaking fluent Hebrew and Aramaic. He never had to read the scriptures. At birth, he knew all the songs, and psalms by heart. His parents did not need teach him anything? He was immune from all the cultural prejudices of his time. It is clear to me that Jesus had one of those epiphanies that all humans have in our life experiences. Yes, he was confronted by this woman's faith and it changed him, it changed his mind and outlook, and prompted him to do a great kindness and heal her helpless daughter.

And maybe this is where our nation is after last week's tragic events in Charlottesville. That we are being confronted with an ugliness, and an evil that we were turning our back on and ignoring.

Our bishop along with hundreds of other Christians and people of faith were worshipping on Friday evening, August the 11th at St Paul's Memorial Church in Charlottesville when the church was surrounded by torch carrying white supremacists. The hooded Klansman, the chants of cleansing our nation of Jews, the murderous rhetoric, the Nazi flags flying. Nazi flags flying in Virginia, angry young men, some armed, surrounding a church. In Virginia – the home to the US Army's 29th Division, the Blue and Gray division, in 1942 was made up of primarily men from Virginia and Maryland. The 116th Regiment of the 29th division was

first on the beaches of Omaha in the war to defeat Adolf Hitler and the Nazi invaders. The 116th Regiment was composed primarily of Virginia National Guard units based in Bedford Virginia. And the losses on that 6th day of June in 1994 were catastrophic – which is why the National D-Day Memorial is in Bedford Va. And on Friday August 11, 2017 Nazi flags were flying in Charlottesville. Surrounding a church. My classmate Pastor Jeanette Lieske was there in the church that evening – and she said it was terrifying.

German resistance martyr and Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless

Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.

If there was ever a time for the Church to speak and to act it is now.

Bonhoeffer's prophetic words cut us to the core: *Silence in the face of evil is itself evil.*

So then, my sisters and brothers in Christ, what are **we** to do in the face of this mounting evil?

Pray - I encourage you to pray. To pray for the young men spouting white supremacy and hatred, and eager to incite violence. To pray for their hearts and minds to be transformed. To pray for tolerance, respect, and love. To pray for

those who choose to go into the streets to counter hate, that they may be at all times and in all ways, be non-violent. To pray that they not sling hateful words in return. To pray for their safety. To pray for tolerance, respect, and love.

We should pray for the family of Heather Heyer who was murdered by a rampaging car, ISIS style. Do pray, too, for those recovering from this brutal attack. Pray for those terrorized. And pray this never happens again.

We should pray for empathy and mutual understanding. What does it feel like to see the Confederate monuments tore down when your ancestors fought with the Confederacy? What is it like to see hooded Klansman parading in public and you are a person of color? What is it like to see Nazi flags and you a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust or like me your uncle landed on Omaha beach and later escaped from a Nazi prisoner of war camp? Pray for empathy and mutual understanding.

We should pray that each of us has the courage to examine our own heart and that the Spirit will provide opportunities for insight and cleansing of those subtle prejudices and biases we all must unlearn. We should pray that we be like Jesus and unlearn those things that are harmful and separate us from one another.

Be alert for those especially young males who may be, for whatever unfortunate reason, attracted to the hatred of the White Supremacist groups and the Alt Right. Radicalization isn't something that just happens for Muslim families, but something that happens right here in our communities, too.

Understand that the solution will not come from this current Congress nor this President. Our nation's moral center is not found in the Federal government. Our moral center is to be found among our people who cherish the democratic ideals upon which this country was founded, who hold "these truths to be self-evident, that all people – no matter their color or ethnicity or station in life, are created equal and they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness".

Our moral center is found in our God who created heaven and earth, the God of Abraham, and Isaac and Jacob, the God who reveals God's very self in the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It will be God's Spirit of freedom and liberation – liberation from the awful sin of racism, the sin of supposed racial superiority, the sin of ethnic hatred – it will be God's Spirit of freedom and liberation in Christ Jesus that will turn this country around. That will

change hearts, and minds and spirits. Pray that the Spirit uses you and me to be agents of this transformation and healing.

We should practice kindness. Be respectful to all people. Go out of your way, make your best effort to show kindness especially to those who are strangers. Be kind. Be kind. Be kind.

And the people of Salem will continue to work together for that beloved community that Jesus proclaims, God's peaceable kingdom that has broken into this world. We will continue to help feed the poor, help house the homeless, help find safe haven for refugees fleeing violence and oppression no matter their religion or ethnicity. We will be God's beloved community that seeks to care for one another. To help each other during tough times. To be a welcoming and an invitational community that practices hospitality for all people.

My prayer, my prayer is that one day when we all meet again, all of us one family with a billion names, we'll meet again in the life clouded in mystery that awaits us, the life beyond death – my prayer is that on that day we will hear Jesus' gracious exclamation echoing among us – "great is your faith!"

Amen