



KALAMAZOO

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"A Sanctuary in the City... Living Faith"

August 20, 2017

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 45:1-14; Matthew 15:21-28

Faith Supreme

The Rev. Dr. Seth E. Weeldreyer

I wanted to talk about Joseph's journey into a foreign land, today. It's a beautiful story. It's one of the moving narratives in all of Hebrew Scripture. It's about death and resurrection, in much the same way that is echoed throughout the New Testament. What you intended for evil, God transformed and used for good. A promise we all need to hear. But this week, the Spirit moved in another direction. To another text about hate, hurt, faith, and new life. Here what the Spirit may say. {read Matthew 14:21-28}

It felt like entering a foreign land. I moved to Richmond, Virginia to get married and begin seminary 23 years ago. In that first month, it was over 90 and dry for 27 straight days. Our ultimate Frisbee lawn was scorched brown. The city was big and a bit daunting. People talked funny. Church folk talked about Montreat which could've been the moon for all I knew, but was the Vatican to Southern Presbyterians. It was all a bit shocking coming from Burlington, Vermont. I missed familiar Green Mountains nestled up to Lake Champlain. I missed breezy summer days with puffy white clouds looking like the Ben and Jerry's ice cream container in my hands! I missed a culture both small-town personal and responsibly global, balancing individual accountability with care for community and all creation.

As I moved from the heart of the Yankee North to the heart of the Rebel South my antipathy went beyond hot weather and weird words. I confess I harbored prejudice, surely rooted in fear of the unfamiliar and insecurity about preconceptions. A few local news stories, insensitive comments, and segregation in communities didn't

help my jaded perceptions about lingering Civil War era illusions. Who were these once enemies? Could I really live there ringed by battlefields and tinged with tributes to bigoted glory? My mind rebelled. Ah, but then, I was in love! My heart belonged to a Southern belle raised in Durham, a William and Mary grad, who could slip into an accent *au naturel*. I made friends with good people disturbed by lingering injustices, some who even liked bits of ante-bellum culture. I met other caring and compassionate people, like me and maybe you, who also say and do things we should probably rethink.

Arthur Ashe passed away just before I arrived in Richmond. The hometown boy become tennis great ... where to put his statue? On Monument Avenue amid grand historic homes where Robert E. Lee, J.E.B. Stuart, and Stonewall Jackson, sit astride their steeds larger than life? Some said: no way! I saw with new eyes what friends told me: sure it's bad in the south, but at least it's clear what or who you're really dealing with. In the north, prejudice often breeds beneath the surface—sometimes intentional, sometimes unintended ignorance—but no less potent. I saw that more than a bronze figure with different facial features, the Arthur Ashe statue was all about wider society. About cultural values, norms, and social structures upheld by memory or current policy. About how symbols shape our lives. About healing old wounds or causing more harm. About who we are and want to become, not just who we've been.

Jesus entered a foreign land. Tyre and Sidon, today in Lebanon, was the home of a different tribe, literally. Jesus just argued with leaders of his religious tribe about traditional beliefs and rituals, what's really important. What defines or defiles us isn't stuff like the food that goes in our mouths, Jesus said, it's about what's in our hearts and comes out of our mouths. Ironically, that's what makes his response to the Canaanite woman seem even worse. The woman seeks healing for her daughter. Like any mother. Much the same as many ways Jesus has already helped others. Except she's a foreigner. She's the enemy. She's the target of prejudice-laced

epithets like “dog”. Her very presence reminds them of ancient conflicts, lingering bias and bitterness. More than the physical healing itself, which gets all of six words, Matthew’s telling us about festering social infection. Yes, Jews are chosen people. They have received God’s grace. Matthew wants people to believe Jesus is the Jewish Messiah. But is that meant to exclude and domineer all others as inferior under Jewish supremacy?

Jesus entered a foreign land, bearing blessings and burdens of his heritage. His encounter on this journey is all about wider society. And it doesn’t take long for ancient antipathies and present prejudice to rise to the surface in the face of a Canaanite woman. First, he simply ignores her, refuses to even acknowledge she’s there. His disciples urge him to chase away the impudent pest who doesn’t know her proper place. Undeterred, she kneels before him and cries out what we sing every week: *Kyrie eleison*. Lord, have mercy, help me. Her heart’s hanging out there. Deep, intimate longing for relationship with God. Jesus’ attitude is shocking. His caustic words catch our breath. “It’s not fair to take children’s food and throw it to the {insert racist, religious, homophobic or other slur here}.”

Now, friends, we need to pause for a moment. I’ve wrestled with whether to actually speak such words. I talked with my family and then lost a bit of sleep last night. I choose not to utter such slurs in this sermon. Not because it would be uncomfortable to hear for white, straight, privileged people like me. Rather, because whatever the intended point I try to offer, first I want to do no further harm to anyone. As we continue learning together how to speak truth, if I get something wrong, please talk with me. I want this place to remain a sanctuary of God’s grace for all, as much as possible, unsullied by any visceral memory or hint of hate. Still, fact is, people say such words. Others hurt deeply, like some of us here today. And we can’t avoid it, staying silent. Beyond talking about it safely, comfortably, how do we get the offense, really feel the hurt? You see, here’s the real point that I believe Matthew

tries to make. *That's what Jesus says!* Is this the compassionate leader who loves all people and inspires us to work for grace and peace?!

Part of the point is that we can't simply ignore it. Friends, how we make sense of his response shapes our faith. Scholars debate – maybe it's not as bad as it sounds. Maybe Jesus was just tired, he didn't really mean it. Maybe he was just testing her to see how strong she really was. That sounds abusive. But maybe.

In the way Matthew tells the good news, including those conflicts just before, here's how I make sense of it. Woman comes to Jesus. He sees a chance to illustrate what he's just debated. He waits to see what the disciples will do. Sure enough, they echo accepted values. They voice the prejudice so insidious, sometimes even in our best intentions and practices. So he goes with it. "I was sent only to make the Jews great again!" He verbalizes what everyone believes.

The woman doesn't buy it. She confronts the blatant insensitivity and lack of compassion in her simple, emotional appeal. Jesus extends the prejudice into practical application, with a common insult as salt in the wound, so no one misses the point. Demean her enough, dissociate ourselves, distance us far enough from them, and we'll be all the better. Our supremacy more secure.

I wish I could have seen the woman's face! Confident dignity gleaming in her eye. She doesn't wilt under the heat. She doesn't give up when the going gets rough. Kneeling, embodying a parody of the subservient place Jesus voices, she doesn't deny God's mercy and special relationship with Jewish people, God's chosen. Rather that divine blessing, and call to be a light for the whole human race, is the assumed basis of her hopeful appeal. If God's essence is unbounded mercy and grace, then it should overflow to others, enough for her daughter. "Even if you consider us dogs," she contends, "we're still here. And we're all inevitably, inextricably connected. What nourishes your good life, and what feeds us is

ultimately the same.” Any good Jews who heard the opening sentences of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus’ genealogy, know that connection in their own history. Foreign women like Rahab, Tamar, Ruth ... not unlike the woman at Jesus’ feet, are part of his family lineage. Their blood runs in his veins. Their story shapes his identity.

Friends, despite all prejudice that seeks to demean, and in the extreme, set up one category of persons as supreme over others. Despite deadly consequences of an opposing witness like Roman and religious leaders executing Jesus on a cross. In living, resurrection faith, we see how all people and creation are created in Holy Love, connected in Sacred Grace beyond disputes, and called to seek goodness for all together.

It’s not a long leap to events eight days ago. We can’t avoid it. Can’t ignore it. Paradoxically, the ones who acted like Jews and disciples in scripture are the ones who shouted: “Jews will not replace us! Take America back! Heil ...!” My brother has lived in Charlottesville for over a decade. It’s been twice that long since my first visit to Monticello and University of Virginia when questions about Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson swirled anew. Maybe like some of you, I’ve been to those places we’ve seen pictured—the Jefferson statue ringed by torches like scenes 50 years ago. It’s eerie. It’s scary. In truth, all of us have “been there” ... experiences of the heart if not physical places of conflict. When we’re honest, we all struggle with complexities of prejudice that linger so personally in each of us, and all around us. It’s surely a human tendency to dance with and defend our tribe, however we define it.

Friends, it’s good for us to feel upset and even a bit scared by events in Charlottesville a week ago. It’s important to challenge attempts to make whites or any other category of persons supreme over others. We need to name and resist attempts to advance such positions. And to do so successfully, we need something

more. More than our tendencies to set up straw persons to skewer and burn in effigy by our own words. Prejudice is complicated, insidious, infecting all of us.

I've wondered this week how we might humbly, persistently, graciously respond so that Jesus would affirm us, like the woman: Great is your faith!

How might we live a statement of faith every day, as the Brief Statement frames our worship this morning. Here's what I get when I look at our text again.

First, as Jesus echoed values to challenge them, beyond individual actions in Charlottesville a week ago, we must understand events within a wider frame. Freedom of speech, for example, comes with responsible limitations. What do we accept or not to nurture norms and values of society? And in that spirit, how do our monuments to the past and icons of present culture shape our vision for human goodness? As my son observed, some things like swastikas should be in a museum to learn from horrors of the past, not to repeat it. If we're inspired by faith supreme how do we challenge assumptions and change traditions that need it in our time?

That's what Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to do fifty-some years ago from a jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama. He writes to good people like us longing to make a difference, sometimes struggling with courage and capacity to do so. He reflects on how others label him an extremist for his non-violent direct action. Without tension, he responds, there's often no impetus for real dialogue and practical negotiation. He rejoices with early Christians who transformed mores of society, bringing an end to evils like killing babies and gladiatorial battles for sport. As we seek what's moral in our time of extremes, friends, let us, like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Jesus, try to be extremists for God's love.¹

Michael Jinkins wrote another letter this week. He is President of Louisville Seminary, where Chrissy studied. He preached here last summer. In the wake of Charlottesville, he appreciates attempts to affirm our unity—all colors, creeds, etc.

as Americans first. Still, Jenkins says, it's important in faith to stress we're all human beings first. God comes to us in Jesus of Nazareth playing "for much higher stakes than nationalism or religious affiliation." God calls us all to be fully human in the likeness of Jesus Christ, resisting voices of hatred as violations of Divine Love greater than any other loyalty or authority. That's faith supreme!

Second, as the woman persists undaunted by prejudice, so we persevere speaking truth about how we all bear the imprint of God's love. The sculptor who did Arthur Ashe's statue was shaped by the experience himself. He keeps one of Ashe's favorite quotes taped to his bathroom mirror: "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and run with endurance the race that is set before us." (Hebrews 12:1)ⁱⁱ As we endure and persevere, we need practical witness to be our statement of faith.

This past Thursday night we held a potluck dinner to celebrate our efforts to welcome Syrian Refugees. Here's what she wrote the day after. "What a testament to the lovely Zamel family ... and to the generosity, goodwill, and fellowship of so many people from 1st Pres. and from Kalamazoo. In these times of discord, intolerance, and uncertainty, what a beautiful evening ... Full of love, tolerance, and kindness. I suppose we need the former, to profoundly appreciate the latter." That's faith supreme!

Moments after reading that email, I read news about Israelis helping Syrians. Israel and Syria have an embattled history and remain technically at war. Still civilians in Operation Just Beyond our Border and soldiers in Operation Good Neighbor have delivered food, supplies, and fuel. As one woman explained, "My family, our people were refugees ... now we can help others who are suffering."ⁱⁱⁱ

Friends, in a time of tiki torches, we have the light of Christ. We have purpose—to bear that light to the whole human race. There is hope for our world. We are all

created in and for love. We are connected in grace and mercy. We are called to seek fullness of life in peace together. Somehow we need to find a way to nurture what's good in all of us, not attack what's not. A way to enter the foreign land of another person's experience, bearing all the blessings and burdens of our own lives and wider society.

Before Charlottesville, I wanted to talk today about Joseph and his brothers. All the harm and suffering, turned to weeping revelation, forgiveness, reconciliation. What was intended for evil, God used for good. A journey into a foreign land full of fear, transformed by sacrificial love. It's a beautiful experience. It's a powerful promise. Dear friends, it's our true hope. And maybe, one day, it won't be such a long leap to our lives. For now, the way I see it, Matthew reminds us we're not quite there. Until then we'll keep learning and debate long. We'll wrestle and get it wrong.

Yet, we are resurrection people! We trust that in Jesus Christ, God breaks the power of sin and evil. In our broken and fearful world, we go

to witness with courage in holy and joyful lives;

to work for the fullness of peace in our daily tasks;

and to watch for the Easter dawn of God's new heaven on earth.^{iv}

That's faith supreme!

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Letter_Birmingham_Jail.pdf

ⁱⁱ <http://wtvr.com/2016/07/07/arthur-ashe-monument-20-years-later/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/08/18/544280688/from-israel-quiet-efforts-are-underway-to-aid-civilians-in-syria>

^{iv} Abridged from *A Brief Statement of Faith of the Presbyterian Church (USA)*