

Worship for August 20, 2023

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

*Call to Worship

Look to the mountains! Look to the hills!

Love comes to us with joy!

The world is filled with beauty.

Flowers appear on the earth, birdsong brightens the day.

Crops yield their produce in abundance,

The air is filled with sweetness.

The summer of God's love is with us.

Let the oil of gladness anoint your souls.

Arise and sing for joy!

*Hymn 14 For the Beauty of the Earth

Prayer of Confession

God of justice and righteousness,

your call beckons us:

to live faithful lives,

to turn from wickedness,

to walk in your ways.

Yet it is easy to turn aside:

to speak a thoughtless word,

to ignore those in need,

to strike out in anger,

to forget your ways.

Forgive us.

Implant your word in our hearts,

and cleanse us from all evil.

By the power of your love,

save us, that we might fully love and serve you. Amen.

*Hymn 698 Take, O Take Me as I Am

Assurance of Forgiveness

God's word has the power to save us.

God has anointed us with gladness,

forgiven and freed us,

to live holy and joyful lives. Alleluia! Amen.

First Reading Psalm 133

Time With Our Young Disciples

Second Reading Matthew 15:21-28

Morning Message

Who has been inside a coal mine? Ed's grandfather was a miner and his dad operated a coal train. When he was growing up, Ed used to take his dad's dinner to him as he passed by the street where they lived. Sometimes he would ride up Kelly's Creek with him. It is a fond memory.

I have no experience with mining, which Ed saw as an incomplete education, so, one day he took me to the exhibition coal mine in Beckley. We rode in a car a short distance into the mine. It was dark, cold, and damp.

The guide was very knowledgeable, pointing out the various aspects of the mine, the routine of a typical day, the dangers that lurked. He showed and demonstrated some of the equipment miners carried into the mine and showed us their lunch bucket and how it was packed.

He stopped frequently to answer questions. When he was talking about lunch, a woman raised her hand and asked, in all seriousness, "Where did they wash their hands?"

The question just hung there for a long moment before the guide said they didn't wash their hands. And we moved on.

In our text, Jesus is engaged in a conversation about ritual cleansing. We have to remember that the gospel of Matthew is the most intensely focused on the Jewish community, their customs and practices, what is required and what is forbidden. Jesus observes some but not all the protocol and that makes him suspect to the authorities and there is increasing conflict with them. This is a major theme of Matthew's gospel. It is a theme that will build right up to the ride into Jerusalem and the end of his life on earth.

As this story unfolds, Jesus has just had an encounter over ritual cleanliness. He insists that it is not what goes into the mouth that is of concern. It is what comes out of the mouth that is important.

He soon gets an opportunity to put that to the test.

They have moved to Tyre and Sidon, places that had become adversarial with Israel. A Canaanite woman comes seeking help for her daughter. This is a very curious thing indeed. This is the only use of the word “Canaanite” in the entire New Testament. So, why does it appear?

Upon entering the Promised Land, the Israelites were told to exterminate the Canaanites to prevent them from being influenced by them and drifting into idolatry. In other words, the prohibition against associating with Canaanites is meant to preserve the faith, nationality, culture, and the race.

We have to remember that what distinguishes Jews from other faiths is that they are monotheistic, one God is worshipped. Other faiths may worship gods, plural.

But, in Matthew’s gospel, we find that those Canaanites who agree to follow the Lord can be integrated into his people, as were Jesus’ foremothers: Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth.

This is one of fourteen healing stories in the gospel of Matthew. This story closely resembles an earlier one where a Centurian is seeking healing for his servant. In both instances, the petitioner is not asking for themselves, but they are advocating for someone under their care.

The woman addresses Jesus as “Lord.” This is the name the disciples call Jesus. The Jewish authorities call him “rabbi” and “teacher.”

So, she is showing herself in league with Jesus’ closest friends. She understands that Jesus has been sent to the children of Israel. But, she, a Gentile, persists. The disciples just want Jesus to get rid of her. Maybe they are tired or maybe they are trying to prevent another dust-up with the authorities.

Jesus' first obligation is to the house of Israel, and that is where his attention is directed. But, we soon see, as Jesus sees, that to remain laser-focused on Israel, to the exclusion of the wider world, is too limiting.

The woman and Jesus have a conversation about the unusual nature of her request. He was sent to the lost sheep of Israel. He argues that it was not right to give to the dogs what is meant for the children of Israel.

That seems really harsh to us. Jews did not have dogs for pets. They were considered mean and unclean and no Jew would have them in their house. But, the Greeks, and this woman is of Greek origins, are quite fond of dogs. So, she brings a new meaning to the word "dog." In her culture, dogs would be allowed to enter a home and, indeed, sit under the table where they could feast on the scraps left by those who dined.

She wins Jesus over. Her daughter is healed, thanks to Jesus and her mother's faith.

So, where can we find ourselves in this story? In a number of places, but this is what came to me as I was preparing this message: It seems we are more and more polarized these days. And I wonder if it will ever end.

I noticed on Friday that there were two editorials in the paper by local citizens about candidates for elections. Each writer was advocating for the election of a particular candidate. Nothing wrong with that. But, the supporting testimonies were heavily based on the candidates' religious affiliation. In the writers' opinions, the candidate of the other party should be disqualified based on the defective nature of their faith.

Friends, I know how this kind of thing can reel us in. And before we know it, our blood pressure goes up, we say too much, and we solve nothing. We are no more evolved than the Pharisees who called Jesus an infidel over ritual hand-washing.

It took years for me to completely understand what was so insulting about that question about minors washing their hands before eating. It was probably unintentional, but, whether it was just curiosity or not, the effect it had was to point

out the difference between “us” and “them.” It called to mind differences in class and occupation and location and culture.

Some of us wouldn’t dream of letting a dog into our house. Some of us invite them in and some of us even welcome them to the table and we feed them.

And the dogs are just hungry. They don’t care if we have washed our hands.

*Hymn 693 Though I May Speak

*Affirmation of Faith The Apostles’ Creed p. 35

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns

Prayers of the People and the Lord’s Prayer

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings

Offertory

*Hymn 607 Doxology

*Prayer of Dedication

God of light and beauty, every gift is from you.

Even our ability to give is a blessing of your love.

We offer what we have and what we are that you may use our gifts

to give birth to a world of peace and understanding,

where none are in need,

and all are drawn into your embrace. Amen.

*Hymn 692 Spirit, Open My Heart

*Blessing

In everything, let us offer our thanks to God.

In our darkness and questioning,

in our relief and rejoicing,

in the assurance that God holds us in love,

that we may cheerfully serve others,

replacing fear with the hope born of Eternal Love. Amen.

*Postlude