

PENTECOST 10

August 17, 2014

Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor David G Mullen

Matthew 15: (10-20) 21-28

Her daughter was trapped by a demon, enslaved in a way that left her alienated from normal life. Why else would her pagan mother cry out to Jesus the Jewish teacher? In fact, there are demonic forces everywhere in the world. Given the story we've just heard, I cannot help but think of the ongoing tragedy of the Middle East, particularly of the conflict between Israel and Gaza. Even though we know there is long, long history of hatred between the Jews and the Arabs, to see it continuing in our day is, to say the least, sad, and perhaps incomprehensible. I think of all the mothers now crying out to God.

And I think of the tragedy that's erupted this past week in Ferguson, Missouri, another conflict between whites and black, between Christians, if the truth be told. Demonic forces, which we usually call racism, politics, and oppressive systems work to keep people isolated from and fearful of, one other. And thus true community is lost in an ongoing maelstrom of hatred and violence. And I think of all the mothers of children, both white and black, crying out to God for healing and hope for their sons and daughters.

And demonic forces afflict the church, too. It is a well-known fact, and to my way of thinking, a deeply abhorrent sin when pastors and other Christian leaders encourage God's people to engage in a self-righteous mission to separate from "those others" in the church, whether locally or nationally, now deemed unworthy of fellowship. Families have been torn about by such folly. People have been killed by such folly. And down through the ages mothers and fathers have cried out to God for mercy for their children.

One day in Westhope, North Dakota, a new priest showed up at the Catholic Church. He was an ultra-conservative priest sent there by the Bishop on a mission was to straighten out the church after the follies committed by their last priest. His first move to forbid his parishioners to have anything to do with the other two churches in town—the Presbyterian and Lutheran church which I served. Since this was a very small community, families had loved ones in all three churches, and they were used to freely attending one another's' churches for all sorts of events and were happy about that. Town leaders in fact were proud of the local ecumenism. But now this new priest was attempting to turn us non-Catholics into "the other". Hard-liner that he was, he forbid his Catholics to attend even

weddings and funerals. Now his people were in agony. Do you mean, Father, that I cannot attend grandma's funeral at the Lutheran Church, just across the alley? Simple human decency and compassion was being forbidden. There was a hue and cry all over town. People came to me asking what can we do? At my suggestion local Catholic leaders cried out to the Bishop to remove the priest. And their pleas were answered. The priest who had attempted to make us see people as dangerous "others" left, and life as community returned.

The forces of evil are in the world, working to divide us from one another in order to conquer us. The story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman can be seen as a hugely important archetype of the unfolding mission of the church. We do not have permission ignore people just because to us they are "other". Even Jesus, who insisted that his mission was only to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" finally come to see the "other"—that Canaanite woman, who by her persistent cries got him to see her as a real person with a real and honest plea for her afflicted daughter. And the 'great faith' Jesus sees is that the woman, believing in a God greater than the party line of Israel, refused to allow herself or, even more, her sick daughter, to be dismissed! Thus the boundaries of Jesus' understanding of God's mission expanded. And her daughter was freed from the demonic.

This is more than a report on a bit of history. Matthew's goal is to open his readers up to the expansive reality of the Living God, a God who encounters us and calls to us, through the cries of the suffering world, let our hearts be moved beyond the boundaries of our inadequate understandings, ideologies, and yes, theologies. Jesus had to learn this, and so does the church that follows him. That is Matthew's point, and that is *the* issue that confronts humanity in every era, but especially now. Does everyone really and truly belong to God?

A great psychologist by the name of Alfred Adler discerned that basic to human formation was the yearning to belong. He developed a theory that explained misbehaviors in children on the basis of their profound desire to belong. If they sense that their belonging is threatened, they will misbehave, in identifiable ways. Adults, I dare say, are the same. God has created us not only for him, but for one another, in families, in churches, in communities, and on this planet earth. Yet, the demonic forces operative in our world seek everywhere to convince people that either they do not belong, or that they can belong only by joining this or that political party, religious group, cult, urban tribe, or gang, and then lording it over others.

Belonging—to one another and to God. Isn't true for us, that when you get down to it, what we hope to find here, and many of you have found here, is a community of belonging. This is, for you, spiritual home. But do not be seduced by coziness. And if any here are afflicted with broken and feelings of outsiders, here be comforted and find your place at the table. But if any here are comfortable and self-assured over/against others, then may your hearts broken open to the world. Watch the news and listen! Were our hearts broken open when we heard about the death of Robin Williams? Hear the conversations in our daily lives and listen! The voices and sorrows of the mothers, fathers, sons and daughters in the world around us are begging us to hear with the ears of God in the midst of the chaos the cries of their unformed faith, and to heal with welcoming word of Christ. Here among us ideas of insider and outsider must disappear. The concept of "the other" must vanish. Everyone belongs to God. Everyone!

This is the gospel message: what will lead to the healing of the sorrows of the demonically fractured world is trust that there is a kind of belonging that runs deeper than any religious leanings, political parties, ethnicity or class! It is called community; it is Life and is the gift of the living God. For that gift, Jesus finally lived and died, himself becoming the example of Great Faith, and in his resurrection, the healing of the world.

Today, in this world so fractured by evil demonic forces, we kneel again before him and cry, Lord, help us. Lord, help us see beyond our differences. Lord, give us Great Faith to see that your way is the way to healing, hope, and wholeness. Amen.