

Grace Episcopal Church Galena, Illinois
August 17, 2014
6th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 11A

The Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell
Text-- Isaiah 56: 1, 6-8; Matthew 15: 21-28

Earlier this week, our Presiding Bishop, Katherine Jefferts-Schori, urged congregations to observe this Sunday, as one "of prayer for those in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East living in fear of their lives, livelihoods, and ways of living and believing." Our Prayers of the People today contain such petitions.

As the week played out, though, tragedies nearer home have captured our attention--not that existing problems have been resolved or have receded. But there's only so much we can take in! The suicide death of such a popular figure and gifted actor, Robin Williams has brought an outpouring of tributes but also thoughtful reflections on the devastation of depression that affects so many and has no easy cures or answers. How we have, perhaps, begun to move past blaming the victim and the notion that taking one's own life is a selfish act. And yet, no one seems to know how to find relief from such intractable psychic pain. And for some, the only way to be free of the darkness is to leave this life. Then, the tragic killing of 18 year old Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri last weekend followed by protests and overly militarized police actions against the protestors that have caused long standing racial tensions to boil over into more violence and a media frenzy.

I don't know about you, but I am weary. I am weary of seeing the looks of terror and desperation on the faces of Gazan and Iraqi mothers whose babes in arms are dying or wounded. I am weary of seeing small children, not much older than my own grandsons, being sent out to the risky border crossings in often futile searches for a little more safety in their young lives. And I am weary of the inequities and, yes, racism, that leads communities to march and protest the deaths of young people shot down in their prime--whether by gang violence, being in the wrong place at the wrong time, or simply because of "walking while black."

My own sheltered, relatively privileged white life--no, let's be honest, *very* sheltered and privileged compared to the rest of the world--cannot come close to fathoming what others live with every single day. I am a mother of sons. And a grandmother of grandsons. But I have never had to teach the lessons I've read about this week from mothers of color trying to raise their boys to manhood. Lessons like how to dress, how to carry themselves, how to walk down the street or hang out with friends so as not to be perceived as threatening. I celebrated my sons' growth in stature and strength, the first shave, and never worried that they might not live to graduate from college, let alone high school.

I do not diminish the grief and desperation of fathers or grandparents. But since today's Gospel reading is about a mother, seeking help for her daughter, it is the drawn and grieving faces of mothers that have haunted me most this week.

This mother, is "other," a Canaanite, and she is audacious enough to ask for help from Jesus,

a Jew. And he doesn't treat her very kindly--at first. This is not the Samaritan woman at the well where Jesus breaks conventions to speak with her. No, this a surprising Jesus who does not do what we've seen him do before—reach out to the outcasts and outsiders, those despised, diseased, or possessed.

In this story, he has set out to withdraw again, he and the disciples, after dealing with many, many needs of the people as well as some more challenging encounters with the Pharisees. Maybe he is exhausted, maybe discouraged that his mission is not going as well as he had planned. Those “lost sheep of Israel” he has come to save are not jumping all over themselves to follow him. They just seem to want what he can do for them or to confront and test him. This day he has gone to Tyre and Sidon, crossing the barrier into Gentile territory which is now Lebanon. It is probably significant that the writer of Matthew calls the woman who approaches him a Canaanite. Canaanites no longer existed in Jesus' time. It was like calling people today Saxons or Vikings--so it evokes the ancient enmity dating all the way back to the Exodus and the entry into the Promised Land. Calling her a Canaanite emphasizes her otherness, her outsider status. And that is how Jesus treats her. First by a total lack of response to her plea to heal her daughter. He says nothing, just keep walking along.

The disciples are annoyed by her. She is loud and insistent, not meek and groveling. She is smart, too, using the language of the Jews, calling him “Lord” and “son of David.” The disciples just want Jesus to send her away, get her out of their face. And Jesus says, “Can't help you. I was sent to the lost sheep of Israel, not to people like you.” And even when she doesn't take “no” for an answer and, in fact, throws herself at his feet in a worshipful posture, it gets worse! Jesus says one of the cruelest things imaginable. He essentially calls her and her daughter dogs! Says it wouldn't be fair to give her what rightfully belongs to his people. We know what it would mean to call someone a dog today. It wasn't any better in Jesus' time. It was—and is—nasty insult. [And, by the way, at least one commentator has used that very epithet to describe the protestors in Ferguson.]

Then comes the stunner! She rolls with it. She doesn't run off in a huff but, still on her knees, says, “Yeah, I guess I am a dog in your mind—a woman, a Gentile, unclean—a double dog. But that doesn't mean there's nothing for me. Even the dogs get the crumbs that nobody else wants.”

What do you suppose made the difference with Jesus? What made him give her what she desired--the healing of her daughter? Was it her persistence? Her trust in his ability to help her? Her desperation about her daughter's health that is so intense, that she is willing to endure humiliation, an assault on her being?

And what kind of Jesus is this that we find in these short eight verses? This story is bound to mess with our Christology--with what we learned in church school and confirmation

classes —“Jesus, the same yesterday, today, and forever.” Jesus never changing. We might want to explain this story away—that Jesus was just testing the woman; Jesus was just setting up a lesson for the disciples, leading them to understand that his ministry was broader. But even so, it was cruel.

I believe that this is a story about the One that our creeds say is fully divine and fully human--not some pale facsimile or more one than the other. And that humanity shows here. This is Jesus who is not some distant person shielded from human pain and emotions. This is Jesus who is vulnerable, and, yes, capable of being *changed!* *Of having his vision expanded, stretched. By being face-to-face with the "other," with her trouble and despair, this woman changed him.* He was here for all people! All lost sheep, not just the Jews.

In Wednesday's *Gazette* was a letter to the editor that I found offensive. A man was railing against the Hamas and the rocket fire into Israel. He came very, very close to calling the Gazan people "rats." Just as close as Jesus came to calling the Canaanites "dogs." I would imagine that most of us are anti-terrorist, opposed to what Hamas is doing. But perhaps we should get a bit closer. Come face-to-face with the desperation that underlies such actions--whether it is in occupied Gaza where people penned up without access to the basic necessities. Whether it is in the streets of our cities where there are no jobs, insufficient education. Whether at our borders that offer a glimmer of hope. In our own neighborhoods where countless people battle the despair of depression. Or whether it is that ancient Canaanite mother frantic for her daughter and her daughter's demons. Not dogs, not rats. But people.

It's all the same, really. Whether we are separated by miles or by centuries or by social settings, we all want the same thing. We want to be seen face to face. We want to be heard to the depths of our souls. We want to be treated as the human beings we are, created by a loving God. We want to be freed from the demons of want and death, injustice and oppression. Each time we renew our baptismal covenant, we make this promise: We are asked, "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?" and we reply, "I will, with God's help." That is our job description.

The oracle from the prophet Isaiah speaks to those who are left out or despised: "thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant... I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant— these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer...for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel...."

May it be so. Amen