

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Matthew 15:21-28

Isaiah 56:1,6-8

Psalms 67:1-7

Romans 11:1-2a,29-32

August 16, 2020

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

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I was reading through my Facebook feed the other day...something I rarely do anymore. In fact, I have come to avoid most social media these days except for posting a few smiling, non-controversial photos here and there. I have stopped scrolling through because there was one thing that kept standing out to me – an unchangeable, unshakeable attitude of righteousness.

Or, maybe it's better to say, a fierce inability to change one's mind. It's as though we have become so invested in our political or social or religious stances that to shift our perspectives has become a sign of weakness, not a statement of character. We have built our identity on a cause, a political perspective, a religious affiliation. But, to what end?

It seems that it doesn't matter what other perspectives or experiences we might be presented with. We have become immobile for fear of losing the identity we have so carefully built.

The other day, I will admit, I let down my guard and scrolled through Facebook for a moment and one comment thread caught my eye. It was a conversation that went like this..." My family is suffering mental trauma from all of this social distancing. My children are being marched into school like weaklings, 6-feet apart with no joy, no comradery, no sense of love. I have had it. I am standing up for my family's well-being."

Someone then replied in support of her angst..."Agreed! Where is God in all of this? I only see the devil."

I had to stop and reread the thread a number of times to get at the depth of what was being communicated. It became clear that there was no changing their minds on this one. A few people tried to share other perspectives but my FB friends had already cast their identity on their perspective, on their family's experience, and they weren't changing.

But what struck me most in this thread was the sheer amount of support for the comment, "Where is God in all of this because all I see is the devil."

Take a moment to think about this conversation. God was only available for one perspective, one experience. Anything outside of that experience was deemed evil, wrong, devoid of God.

Yet, haven't we all done that at one time or another, especially these days? Where we have taken such a strong stance and claimed ultimate righteousness with God on our side? And in doing so, we fall short of listening to and understanding someone else's viewpoint and someone's else's needs. That's what I mean when I say we too often have an unchangeable, unshakeable attitude of righteousness, a fierce inability to change our mind.

Think about it...when the stakes of identity are so strong, of course we don't want to change our mind. Because to change our mind would mean to turn from God, the God that we had claimed to be on our side. The God that we built our righteousness upon.

It made me really consider the depth of our fears when it comes to changing our mind, of understanding another perspective and shifting our actions accordingly. I'm talking about our ability to realize that God is so much more expansive than our individual identities. At times, that is a downright scary proposition.

Mitzi Smith, Professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary stated it like this...

*"Too often we cannot or refuse to empathize with people whose experience is different from our own. If the oppression, injustice, or pain is not happening in our house and neighborhood or does not impact our race, gender, class, or sexuality, then we dismiss it as unwelcomed, unjustified noise."*

She then relates this to our Gospel teaching. This week, we are presented with a scenario in Matthew where both Jesus and the disciples have built an identity on being distributor's of God's grace. As they are going about their day, a Canaanite woman comes up to them pleading and shouting for help because her daughter is possessed by a demon. She is quickly dismissed in a cold, judgmental way. Jesus ignores her. The disciples urge him to send her away. Jesus shockingly responds in the affirmative, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (Which by the way, does not include the Canaanite woman, a Gentile).

Yes, even Jesus took a stand of skewed righteousness, claimed his identity, and dismissed someone in need. Someone who apparently didn't have God on her side and was undeserving of grace. Seriously? Is this the Jesus we know and love? It is.

And, I am glad we see this moment in Jesus' life. I am glad we are offered a Jesus who is staking his identity on a very particular interpretation of God's grace...a grace that he thought at the time was meant only for certain folks.

We often perceive Jesus as being perfect and without flaw. So this story often comes with an unsettling challenge for many Christians. Could Jesus have made a mistake, a misjudgment? Was his righteousness ill placed? Is this a situation where he needed to change his mind?

Here's why I like this story. I like to think that Jesus actually grew in his ministry and in his understanding of God. I like to think that he made mistakes at times. I especially like the fact that he was willing to change his mind even if that meant taking a bite of humble pie.

In the moment that shifted his identity, we are told the woman knelt down in front of Jesus and said, Jesus help me. And, he allowed her to tell her story.

He listened. He didn't disregard her experience. He wasn't overly righteous. Instead, he allowed his heart to open and out of that emerged a courageous conversation of change.

We have all made mistakes like Jesus made that day. We have all judged situations to our benefit. We have all claimed God on our side at the expense of others. But, like Jesus, we can also change our minds. Sometimes, it's easy to overlook the fact that God is not just with us but is also in the places that make us uncomfortable.

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote about changing her mind about the presence of God like this...

*"If God is waiting anywhere, God is waiting everywhere. That is a big change for someone who once believed God's address was the church."*

In other words, she had to experience God in the places she might have once disregarded, the places that made her uncomfortable, the places that challenged her identity as a righteous Christian.

So, when we feel our identity is being challenged, when things are uncomfortable, when we ask, where is God in all of this, maybe instead we should ask where isn't God in all of this?

For some of us, that will mean changing our minds a bit especially in these divisive times. It will mean searching those moments when we find ourselves holding onto God in support of our own comfort at the expense of someone else. It will mean acknowledging the presence of God in places we find challenging. Because true righteousness might be a little uncomfortable.

Because if God is waiting anywhere, God is waiting everywhere.

Amen.