



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Rev. Edward M. Sunderland, *LCSW, Associate Rector*

Imagine

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, August 17, 2014
The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Matthew 15:21-28*

The conflicts that rage around the world broke out on the streets of Ferguson, Missouri this week, threatening the safety and security of everyone and challenging the white supremacist narrative that racial injustice in America is a thing of the past. Racial injustice is not a thing of the past in America or anywhere else.

I believe the story about Jesus and the Canaanite woman in this morning's Gospel contains truth that can help us transform situations of racism and inequality in today's world, but first let us look at the story itself. On the surface it is one of many which preachers lament, disparage, and even try to disown. It would be so much easier and more scholarly just to say that Jesus, a Jew, did not so callously dismiss this Palestinian woman. And yet if we believe Scripture to be the Word of God, we have to look at this story whether it happened or not. For you see we call the Holy Scriptures the Word of God not because the events actually happened but because we believe that "God inspired the human authors and because God still speaks to us through the Bible."

In the story a Canaanite woman, a non-Jewish native of the land the Jews call Israel—that is, a Palestinian woman—approaches Jesus and the disciples and begs for mercy for her daughter. Jesus gives the worst insult one human being can give to another: he ignores her. But she persists, and rather than welcoming her Jesus states that his message is only for the lost sheep of the House of Israel. This does not stop her. Instead she kneels before him and says, "Lord, help me." There are many responses that one could imagine, but it is hard to imagine Jesus saying what the Gospel reports: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Even the fundamentalists have trouble with this line, and the best they can come up with is that Jesus, being God, knows all things and so he gives her an opportunity to show off her faith by calling her a dog. That is a stretch for me as are most things that the fundamentalists come up with. The all-knowing Jesus seems a bit too God-like in this explanation; and yet if he were so God-like, couldn't he have found a gentler way to set this all up? In spite of all the textual and historical reasons to doubt the authenticity of this saying, I wonder what God is saying to us today. To be honest, I am not sure. Perhaps it is that everyone, even Jesus, can suffer compassion fatigue; everyone can have a bad day. The fact that Jesus may have said such a hurtful thing is a big stretch for most of us and may even be heretical.

The place in this story that there is redemption, of course, is in the Palestinian woman's answer. She could have been hurt or disappointed by what Jesus said. She could have gone away and called Jesus a phony, another pious hypocrite. In the 21st century he would be the reason she doesn't go to church anymore. But no. For you see, she is on a mission that means more to her than any insult or attack. She has a daughter who is not well, and she will not give up! Instead, she enters into the world of the racially charged put-down that Jesus has delivered and opens space for him to respond as the possibility she believes that he is. She creates the possibility for him to be bigger than he was being and he responded. Her daughter is healed.

This story creates many possibilities for us as we, oppressors and oppressed, struggle with racial and economic injustice. The first thing that occurred to me is that when neither side is armed confrontation is seldom deadly. Imagine a world where guns had not been manufactured in abundance and sold cheaply and a world in which local police forces were not militarized. As I have read with horror about confrontations occurring around the world, one of the more naive quotes was reported in the New York Times on August 4th. A UN official, responding to one of the many attacks in Gaza, is reported to have said, "Why aren't the safe zones working?"

Twice each day the UN Relief and Works Agency, which is sheltering nearly 260,000 people in 90 schools, emails the Israeli authorities with their exact locations as a way to create safety. The notion that in the midst of war or any type of armed conflict one can be safe seems hopelessly naive. In the end, no human relationships can be entirely safe, but they can be less lethal with fewer weapons available.

Another possibility that this story creates for me is one that says when someone is up to something bigger than themselves they are less likely to allow other people and their attacks to stop them from achieving their larger purpose. Somehow when people are up to bigger things it is easier for them to resist the temptation to indulge in their resentments. By not indulging in resentment, in fact by giving up the right to resent something, they are actually forgiving the party who has done them wrong. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. knew the power of this kind of resistance.*

"To our most bitter opponents we say: We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws because noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. Throw us in jail and we shall still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process and our victory will be a double victory."

Another possibility that this story creates for us is a new way to think about what it means to live without sin. This is where I may become more than a little heretical. One of the things that have always troubled me about orthodox Christian theology is the notion that Jesus did not sin. I have always had it that for Jesus to be without sin meant that he never sinned, never made a mistake, and never intentionally hurt anyone. We know that Jesus did many things that according to the law were sinful, and he was not particularly bothered by it. And we have stories like this one and the one where Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers in which his actions appeared to hurt others. The difference between us and Jesus seems to be that if he sinned in this story when he was called up short, he didn't offer excuses or try to minimize or deny the pain he may have caused. Instead he made things right. When I realize that I have harmed or oppressed someone—that is, when I realize that I have sinned—I tend to walk around carrying my sin as if it were baggage. My excuse is that by holding on to the baggage, it will stop me from sinning in the future. But in the end, the extra baggage weighs me down, and the weight of the baggage slows me down. It stops me from making amends, and it is in the end all about me and has nothing to do with the damage I have caused or helping the person I have oppressed.

Imagine how different the world would be if oppressors took actions to undo the effects of their oppression and went about healing the world without excuses or attempts to minimize the pain. Imagine how different the world would be if the oppressed could give up their right to resent or forgive their oppressors and live without the second-hand oppression of having bitterness and resentment flow through their veins. Indeed this would be the Kingdom of God here on earth. But if all of that is too hard for you to imagine, at least try to imagine a world where there were no guns for the oppressors to use to oppress or for the oppressed to use to overthrow the oppressors. Imagine a world where there are no missiles or rockets for countries to hurl at each other. Human relationships may not be safer, but they would be less lethal; and that in my opinion would be a good thing.

* "Loving Your Enemies" by Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, at Christmas, 1957. He wrote it while in jail for committing nonviolent civil disobedience during the Montgomery bus boycott.