

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, August 20, 2017
Sermon preached by the Rev. Daniel Vélez Rivera
Lessons: Genesis 45:1-15, Psalm 133, Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32, Matthew 15: 10-28

Today's readings point in the direction of God's holy vision and passionate desire for a beloved community. The timing of these readings couldn't have been better given some of the ugliness that we have witnessed in these past few days; a spirit of fragmentation and disunion which are examples of broken humanity needing reconciliation. In this context and with the lessons that we just heard a moment ago, Bishop Michael Curry recorded a statement earlier in the week asking Episcopalians and the world to be in co-mission with Christ right now, and to help strengthen our communities with love by breaking down violent words and actions with prayers and gestures of peace and unity. As I listened to his statement I asked myself how can we co-mission with Christ and maintain a beloved community?

The answer is in this room. We respond with love, with prayer, with tolerance, with unity, and with hope. Is there a recipe? How does one do create and sustain a community of love? Bishop Curry invited the Church and all believers to strengthen ourselves first, then to support one another, person by person, parish by parish, community by community. By strengthening our beloved communities, we become antidotes to hatred, violence, racism, anger, and all the isms that one can identify. We can be wellsprings of love, compassion, justice, and holiness; in other words, godliness. We are God's instruments, we are the ingredients necessary to piece together the fragments of broken humanity that embody the resurrection of Christ himself and we strengthen ourselves by relying on God. As Bishop Curry's said, "the fabrication of Christ's beloved community is our mission, and we must engage our mission in co-mission with the Almighty God."

I started by saying a few moments ago that today's readings point in the direction of God's vision and passionate desire for a beloved community. That sounds kind of hokey, I know, but bear with me for a moment and let's engage with scripture to see how ugliness has historically turned into grace and how the broken fragments of humanity were glued back together by the mercy of God. From the book of Genesis, we heard the story of Joseph, son of Rachel and Jacob, an important figure in the Bible's and the Quran. Joseph had eleven brothers who conspired to sell him into slavery out of jealousy. Broken? Shattered if you asked me! Joseph rose to become the second most powerful man in Egypt, second to Pharaoh, which is where today's Genesis story begins. The story describes an emotional reunion between Joseph and his brothers who were sent by Jacob to buy food in Egypt because there was a famine back home in Canaan. But the brothers didn't know that Joseph was deputy chief to Pharaoh, they just thought they were meeting with an important guy. When they arrived, Joseph recognized his siblings and proceeded to rebuild a beloved community with them, saying, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt." Then he made a statement that exemplifies in my mind the metaphorical glue that binds the fragments: "It was not you who sent me here, but

God.” In that moment Joseph realized that for his family to survive the famine in Canaan, he had to be reconciled to his conniving, jealous brothers – he had to be sent to Egypt by God so that his kin could be reunited with him.

Let’s reflect on the gospel story and ask ourselves how a beloved community took shape in that story. The narrative selection is in two parts. In the first half of the story Jesus is among a crowd of people who supported the legalistic establishment represented by the Pharisees, particularly regarding rituals of purity, specifically hand washing. The argument was that it was legally and morally required to wash one’s hands before handling food. So, was that the big deal? I guess we can call that matter the catalyst, equivalent perhaps to the statue of a pro-slavery Confederate leader in a town square. The catalyst so to speak was a big thing in that culture. Sound familiar? Jesus tackled the issue of the day because he and his disciples were accused of opposing the important and historic ritual precedent. Jesus tried helping the matter and the people by distinguishing between moral behavior and ritual practices, he said that purity was not external and ritual, but internal and moral. What one says and does matters, it comes from the heart, said Jesus.

The second part of the gospel story is an apparent contradiction to the first part of the story. After saying to the Gentile crowd that what is said and done comes from the heart and matters, he proceeded to deny helping a Canaanite woman seeking Christ’s healing for her daughter. Jesus inserted foot in mouth here. But in her mercy and faithful goodness she prevailed upon Jesus to have compassion on a nobody, to hear her plea, and to take her favor to heart. From my perspective, the Canaanite revealed the incarnation of God to God incarnate, that may sound blasphemous, but consider her words: “Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’ table.” Feed me. Help me!

We have been witnesses to some crazy stuff coming out of people’s mouths and of bizarre actions in the form of intolerant violent behavior and hatred in the name of freedom. My office at St. James’ is less than a block from the Loudoun County Courthouse, where a statue of a confederate soldier sits atop a stone pedestal in the courthouse yard. After last week’s Charlottesville uprising I’ve noticed many visitors at the court house and the new faces have made me wonder, is this like the crowd of Pharisee supporters that Jesus addressed in the gospel story or just tourists checking out the historical sites of Leesburg. Quite frankly, I’ve been afraid that there would be another confrontation this week and, well, I’m brown and we’ve witnessed less than beloved community in Virginia toward people of color. It is 2017, and this week I was afraid to drive home on King Street by the court house, my normal route out of town. So how can I embody and incarnate beloved community? How can we, the instruments of Christ, be in co-mission with Him to incarnate the spirit of love and mercy, hope and courage when our purity, our oneness in the image of God is in question. I don’t know the answer. What I do know is to remain grounded in prayer and hope, that I must be prepared to kneel in front of an angry mob if I must, arms interlocked with the local clergy of Loudoun, and be a

prayer shield of peace and love. But I've asked myself, will that restore the fragments of our brokenness? I need some guidance because I am not sure how God wants me to co-mission and help restore wholeness.

I have also been torn for our Latino members, especially those who live downtown. How do I invite them to be beloved community with a segment of America that might even have thoughts of lynching the lot of us? Is that taking it too far? Is it? I don't know, so I invite you to reflect how we can embody a beloved community today. How can we speak without evil or angry words and still make the point of reconciliation and love in our Leesburg community? When Jesus realized that he had said and acted wrongfully to the Canaanite woman, he turned around and blessed her. How can we bless those who might turn around and harm us?

Jesus came to show us how to move through the chaos and to make a beloved community out of it. His teachings, life, ministry, death, and resurrection point us to the way of love, to a community of hope reconciled to Him. Let's try to find it that community in ourselves and make it happen around us. Amen.