From the Heart: A Mother’s Plea for God to Listen
By Rev. Robin Bartlett
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Matthew 15: 21-28

21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22 Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” 23 But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” 24 He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” 25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” 26 He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” 27 She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” 28 Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

I preached last week on how if Peter had had more faith that God was God, he would have stayed in the boat with the other disciples, and not tried to walk on water at all. Well, this week the news of the world was so relentlessly awful, so achingly, achingly hard and cruel and painful, that I’m sure many of us have collectively felt lost at sea in this boat we are in. News of a beloved comic and actor’s death from suicide hit us like it was a family member, and ripped the band aids off of the wounds of those among us who suffer from depression, reminding us that the demons aren’t just outside of us, but inside of us. Reminding us that the people who need help often look a whole lot like people who don’t need help.

And more headlines. The US launching missiles in Iraq because of the ISIS crisis—Muslims killing Christians. The Gaza Strip continuing to explode with death—Israelis killing Palestinians, Palestinians killing Israelis; Jews killing Muslims; Muslims killing Jews. And this disturbing irony: people in Iraq and Gaza giving tips on Twitter to the folks in Ferguson, Missouri on how to deal with tear gas. This after protests following the death of another unarmed black boy turn to rioting; police in full military gear shooting rubber bullets and tear gas into the crowd, calling protesters “animals.” Beating up reporters. Throwing out our constitution in favor of military law. Our psalm reading today talks about how good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity. Well, we are not living together in unity. God help us.

The whole world needs a lifeboat.

Our scripture today is about a Canaanite woman who pleads with Jesus to heal the demons in her daughter. “Have mercy on me,” she says. “My daughter is possessed by a demon.” And Jesus doesn’t answer her at first, does he? And this woman doesn’t give up. She is tenacious, as mothers are—as PARENTS are—because we would do anything for our
children to be safe and well—even sound like a nutcase—even choose death for ourselves. We certainly risk our dignity. We would plead, we would beg, we would shout and sound desperate and we wouldn’t care—not if it helped our precious children; flesh of our flesh; heart of our heart. And so this mother shouts at Jesus again to help her. This mother won’t take “no” for an answer. And Jesus says, in essence, “I was sent to help the people of Israel. I wasn’t sent to help people like you.” And she keeps yelling, keeps pleading for him to heal her daughter anyway. The other disciples are annoyed with her because she shouts so much. But she is a mother of a hurting child so she kneels at his feet; she begs for small crumbs of hope and grace she knows her baby deserves. And finally, Jesus changes his mind, impressed with her faith, and he heals this mama bear’s daughter.

And sometimes, we need to keep shouting at Jesus until this world heals. Sometimes we need to keep witnessing to the demons we see in the world, because there is nothing else to do but shout until God listens.

And as a mother this week watching the news, hearing the cries of God’s people all over the world, I want to say to Jesus, “I thought that all of us were God’s children, that all deserve healing.” I want to keep shouting at Jesus like the Canaanite woman, the shout of a mother who won’t take “no” for an answer. And I want to shout like that at Jesus today. Don’t ignore us, Jesus. Hear our prayer. Heal our demons. Give us the scraps of hope and grace we deserve.

Heal the demons inside of us, the ones that tell us life is not worth living; the ones that sap us of our joy. Heal the demons outside of us—the war machine we humans can’t seem to live without. Heal the demons that reside both inside and outside of us—the demon of racism, America’s original sin. The insidious demonic thing that keeps us so separate from each other, so prone to dehumanize one another; prone to kill. Don’t ignore us, Jesus. Kyrie eleison, we are possessed by demons.

Another unarmed black boy was killed this week. His name was Mike Brown, and his life mattered just as much as all of ours. Mattered to God. And he was shot by police in Ferguson, Missouri ten times, after he was stopped for jaywalking, and as he held his hands up and said “don’t shoot.” The full details of the investigation haven’t come out yet. He may or may not have stolen cigars from a store beforehand. There may or may not have been some sort of confrontation with police. None of that changes the fact that Mike Brown was a person who did not deserve to die at the hands of someone else. He deserved the same love and grace that you and I do. Mike Brown mattered to God. Mike Brown was unarmed, and he was shot ten times as he held his hands up in surrender, and as he tried to run away. We are possessed by demons; heal us, Jesus.

And I listened to his mother on the news two days ago. “He was my best friend,” she said. “He was starting college next week. He worked really hard to get there...school was not easy for him.”

And she said, “Just because my son is a 6’4” black male walking down the street doesn’t mean he fits the profile for anything other than walking down the street.” “I’ll be OK” she
Mothers of black boys have been lamenting this fear that their children are vulnerable to being hurt and killed by the police for decades. Lamenting the hardness they have to instill in their sweet babies in order to withstand a world that judges them based not on the content of their character, but the color of their skin. Based not on the sweetness of their spirit, but the hoodie they wear to walk to the store in the chill of night. And we who identify as white folks need to be still for a moment and listen to these mothers’ stories without defensiveness. That’s our job as followers of Jesus; as fellow children of God. We need to bear witness. We need to be like Jesus in our scripture today. We need to listen to the shouts and the cries of the tenacious, wounded, fiercely protective mothers advocating for their sons and daughters, even if it takes a lot of shouting to get through to us. And then we need to help each other heal.

A dear friend and colleague, Rev. Carol Cissel wrote yesterday on Facebook: “I have two sons. One was born the color of coffee with too much cream. Usually, by the end of summer, both him and his sister are a beautiful bronzed, caramel shade. My boy has a killer smile and a soft huge heart. And, my grandson looks like him. Baby Drew is ambiguously brown; his chubby cheeks and dimpled thighs are a molten mocha shade that comes from having a "Mixed" family tree.

I have had the "How To Behave WHEN (not if) You Are Pulled Over By The Police" conversation with my son one too many times. "Keep your hands visible on the steering wheel at 10 and 2". Say "Yes Sir" and "No Sir". ASK before you reach for the registration that is in the glove-box. Etc. Etc. Each time he listened to me. He knows the drill.

That does not lessen my fear.

The burning coal of fear I carry within me has once again been fanned into a roaring fire. The tragedy and horror that engulfed the short lives of Darius Simmons, Trayvon Martin, Emmitt Till, Jordan Davis, Michael Dunn and so many more young men of color ... physically hurts me. I feel battered and bruised."

Blogger and mama Stacia Brown wrote this week that parenting her black child is a fool’s errand. She says: “The boys who live are so scarred. I have looked inside more than a few; they are hiding bullets in each quadrant of heart and brain. There are shells lodged in their arteries. Memory, not metal, ticks within them. When they laugh you can hear it rattling like real tin. One false move and their minds or their wills or their ability to feel at all will be gone.

And they will tell you: when I was five, a man nodded at me as he strolled past my house and by the time he reached the end of the block all I saw was his blood. And they will tell you: my brother, my cousin, my best friend, my little sister, my first crush was killed, and the cluster of stuffed bears and balloons we left at the scene was gone within the week. They will tell you: I am not sure how long I will live.”
I know that my white kids won’t need the same training; won’t have hidden bullets in each quadrant of their hearts and brains; won’t feel in fear of dying on the way to school. My shouts of lament this morning are in solidarity with these black parents asking me to turn around and listen.

Because, we know that Jesus is lying on the street with his child, Mike Brown. Jesus is lying in the dust of the Gaza strip and Iraq with the bodies of innocent civilian casualties, whether Christian or Muslim or Jew. Jesus is holding the depressed woman who can’t get out of bed this morning to go to work, much less make breakfast. Jesus is holding the hands of the protesters in Ferguson saying “I am with you.” Jesus is holding the hands of the police, as well, because they have just as much fear lodged in their hearts as each and every one of us do--and they swear to protect and serve, not produce childless mothers and fathers.

And behind our bravado—our false sense of safety—we are all shaking with fear. We live separately from one another, and so we fear each other, and we are far too likely to kill each other because of our fear and our separation. We are shouting kyrie, eleison. Heal the demon of racism that keeps us separate and unable to see God in each person we encounter.

And if we don’t feel God’s presence, if we still have trouble seeing God in people who frighten us, then you and I will keep shouting for God to listen, like an anguished mom who won’t take “no” for an answer.

I am going to close with a poem by Marvin K. White who writes:

Pray as if you are that black boy.
Pray as if you are the bullet.
Pray as if you are tomorrow waiting on him.
Pray as if you are that black boy's mama.
Then pray as if you are that whiteness.

Pray as if you are the witness.
Pray as if you are the curtain through which his killing is witnessed.
Pray as if you are the ground he fell on.
Pray as if you are the blood trying to get away.
Then pray as if you are daylight savings time.

Pray as if you got to break the news to his son.
Pray as if you got to watch the news break.
Pray as if you are the scripture that speaks healing.
Pray as if you can hear black boys crying even when they not.
Then pray as if you know that even god don’t know what to say to this.

Pray as if you know people think praying people right up there with looters.
Pray as if you are listening for justice.
Pray as if you can't hear none.
Pray as if you black and thinking locked up is safer than jay-walking.
Then pray that no lies about black boys get past you.

Pray as if you are a funeral service.
Pray as if you are the money for a spray.
Pray as if you meet a florist that hate funerals.

Pray as if you know quiet hours can’t keep you quiet much longer.
Then pray that the cops don’t say that they thought your clasped hands was a gun.

Look, congregation. We all contain fear. We share that in common. It’s our biggest enemy.
We also all contain love. And love is the antidote. Love puts flight to all fear.

Amen