

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost • August 20, 2017

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8 • Psalm 67 • Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32 • Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28

There's a question that runs through our readings for today. Closer to the surface in some, just alluded to in others. It's a question that most of us, hopefully, are still trying to figure out. Hopefully, because if this past week is any indication, we still haven't reached a consensus on it. That question is How do you deal with difference?

The most important difference that people in the New Testament are trying to make sense of is Jew and Gentile. How do you understand the relationship between Jews, people who are part of God's covenant with Israel, and Gentiles, non-Jews who weren't part of God's covenant in the Hebrew Bible. The relationship is relatively straight forward for most of the Old Testament. But then after Jesus death and resurrection, it starts to get complicated. Because you have to figure out how Jesus changed that relationship. What is the relationship between Jews and Gentiles now? How do we make sense of this difference?

In today's reading from Romans, St. Paul takes up a version of this question that's been plaguing the church. Which is how should Gentile, non-Jewish, believers feel toward Jews who didn't believe that Jesus was the messiah? Many of the Gentile believers thought that Jews who didn't believe Jesus was the messiah were now outside of the family of God. They believed that Jesus had created a blank slate and the way you got right with God was by having faith in Jesus. What God did in the past didn't matter. Any covenants you had with God, any history your people had with God, didn't matter. These Gentiles thought that Jesus was like the big reset button on God's relationship with humanity. Gentiles, the argument goes, have now displaced Jews. The church is the new Israel. Lest you think this is some first-century argument that doesn't have any real world, this is the line of thinking that Nazi Germany used to kill millions of Jews.

In today's reading, Paul takes down this argument. "Has God rejected his own people?" Paul asks, "By no means. For the gifts of God are irrevocable." Paul says that the covenants that God made with the Israelites, with the people we name in our Eucharistic Prayer every week, are still ongoing. They don't end. You can't just say that what God did with them doesn't matter anymore. Paul says that Jesus doesn't erase what God has already done, but that Jesus opens up a new way for all of creation, Jews and Gentiles, to be in relationship with God.

But what's really interesting about Paul's argument is the image he uses to describe the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. Think about the image we normally use to describe welcome. We normally think of one of two things. Rooms or tables. We use language like "Our door is always open" or "There's a seat at the table for you." The nice thing about rooms and tables, though, is that you can always kick out the people you don't like you end up with even more of the room, more of the table to yourself.

But that's not the way Paul thinks about it. Paul says that the Gentile believers were like a branch that was grafted onto an olive tree. They are only there because a gardener went through the work of grafting them into the bigger tree. So, Paul tells those Gentile believers, don't try to exclude other people from God's grace because the only reason you've been adopted into the family of God in the first place is God's grace. As Paul puts it, "remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you." If you try to cut off other branches, you're really only cutting yourself off. Paul says that the only way you can grow is if you grow together.

The image of branches being grafted together is striking because it runs counter to the way most of us talk about community. All too often, we view life with other people as a zero-sum game. That when other people are better off, we must be getting the worse end of the deal. That's the way

777 Wyckoff Avenue Wyckoff, NJ 07481
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those Gentiles thought. That if God's promises to Israel are still going on, then the promises God makes to me must be less valuable. We assume that there is only a finite amount of value, of time, of attention, that is available. Somebody can't get more without someone else getting less. The assumption that life is zero-sum is the dialect that pervades so many of our conversations. It affects how we talk about what kinds of people are welcome in our community. It affects the way we talk about our congregation. It affects the way we talk about institutions. It's a way of thinking that's so pervasive, so seductive, it even gets into Jesus's head.

At the beginning of today's gospel, Jesus gets into an argument with some Pharisees when he says that what defiles a person isn't what they eat or drink. It isn't what goes into their mouths that matters, it's what comes out of their mouths. What matters most, Jesus says, are evil intentions, murder, theft, etc. etc.

And then about two seconds later, while Jesus and the disciples are walking along, a Canaanite woman, a Gentile woman, comes up to Jesus and says, "Have mercy on me. My daughter is tormented by a demon." Now Jesus really doesn't want to be interacting with Gentiles. Earlier this summer we read the story in Matthew's gospel where Jesus sends the disciples out in mission and, if you remember the story, instruction number one, the most important piece of advice they're given, is "go nowhere near the Gentiles." Because time that you spend with Gentiles is time you could be spending with Jews. And you're really not here for the Gentiles.

So Jesus probably isn't going to take too kindly to this woman's petitions. And this Gentile woman seems to get that Jesus isn't really there for her. She even calls him "Son of David," like she's acknowledging, "Look, you're a Jew. I get it. Fully aware. I get this is awkward for both of us, but I heard what you said back there, and I want you to heal my daughter."

Now if you stopped the story here, you would expect a certain ending. You expect Jesus to say, "Yes. Absolutely. I would love to heal your daughter. Nothing would bring me greater joy." Because Jesus is caring. And Jesus is kind. And Jesus is nice. But, Matthew says, Jesus ignores her. Won't even look at her. Jesus fails to step up and do the right thing.

So the disciples say, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." Send her away, because she's being a little bit too needy. Send her away because she's bothering us. Send her away because she's ruining our quality of life. And instead of calling out the disciples for being more concerned with their own comfort than this woman's sick daughter, Jesus says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." I was sent only to Jews, not Gentiles. For the second time, Jesus doesn't step up.

Finally, the woman kneels before him and says, "Lord, help me." And Jesus answers, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." A third time Jesus doesn't do the right thing. And he doesn't just ignore the woman or try to avoid eye contact or something. He calls her a dog. Some translations will try to soften this by reassuring us that the Greek word here *κυνάριον* can actually be translated as "puppy." Which is a pretty sad excuse. Fact is, given three opportunities to do the right thing, Jesus never does.

In the Christian tradition, we affirm that Jesus is fully God and fully human. The fully God part of that is often easier to get our heads around than the fully human part. So we ask questions like Did Jesus get hungry? Yes. Did Jesus get tired? Yes. Did Jesus have friends? Yes. You can imagine what the Sunday school kids ask. That's fine. It's kind of endearing to think about Jesus as some ordinary guy. But today's gospel shows us the flip side of that, which is that Jesus, fully human, was susceptible to the same ways of thinking about difference that most of us are. Because in today's gospel reading Jesus isn't just rude. He's not just impolite. Jesus decides that he's the one who can decide who is welcome and who isn't. Vice-versa from the Gentiles in Paul's letter who

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wanted to put themselves above their Jewish contemporaries, Matthew's Jesus sees himself as belonging exclusively to the Jews, even at the expense of the Gentile woman in the story.

But for all of Jesus's shortcomings in this story, it's the woman who we should be paying attention to. Because there are all kinds of people in the Bible who tell Jesus that he's wrong. Roman officials. Disciples. Pharisees. His own family. But there are two people who are right when they tell Jesus he's wrong. One is Mary, Jesus's mom. And the other is this woman.

After she shoots back that even dogs get scraps from their master's table, Jesus seems to have a change of heart. Far from ignoring her or chastising her, he tells her that she is a woman of great faith and that her daughter will be healed instantly.

It's enough to make your head spin. Just when we were used to Jesus being in the wrong, Jesus suddenly changes his mind and decides to heal the woman's daughter after all. It's a good ending to the story, once you get past the whiplash.

Acknowledging that Jesus is fully human doesn't just mean that Jesus is capable of being hungry or stubborn or wrongheaded. It also means that he's capable of learning. Of having his mind changed. Ninety-nine percent of the gospels are stories about Jesus ministering to people. Maybe that's healing or teaching or something. But Jesus does something to other people. But here, someone ministers to Jesus. Teaches him. Opens up new possibilities where Jesus didn't see any before. The one who thought he had the power to decide who would or wouldn't be worthy of receiving God's promises has his own assumptions and ideas expanded.

Expanded past the zero-sum ways of thinking that permeate so much of our language. Today, Jesus learns something about the world and about himself, namely that his purpose his mission in the world is bigger than he thought it was. That following the work of the Spirit means being open to people that seem like distractions, that seem like they're pulling you away from the important stuff. That he lives into his mission to redeem creation when he sees people not as drains on his time or his resources but as ways for the kingdom of God shine forth. That he doesn't have to view other people as an endless stream of tradeoffs, but as opportunities to embody God's mercy. That the power of his work comes not from how exclusive it is but from how expansive it is. May it be so among us.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor