

The last couple of weeks have seen more acts of violence and terrorism around the globe. Last weekend we mourned the terrorism which was carried in Charlottesville, Virginia by white supremacists and this week we mourn the terrorism carried out by Muslim extremists in Spain.

I've heard and read words of people who find themselves dismayed by these acts of hatred and violence and asking themselves, "What is the world coming to?" So with these acts of violence as well as other acts of violence which may be personal to us I invite us into the second of our readings this morning.

We have been following the lectionary over the past few weeks, the passages which are assigned to each Sunday of the year and follow the church calendar. Today we are invited into the 15th chapter of Matthew.

In this passage we will see a conflict over the washing of hands. Now that may not seem like a big deal unless you are a parent trying to teach good hygiene to your child or a hospital worker trying to prevent the spread of disease. But for Jews during the time of Jesus, hand washing was a really big deal.

Prior to the passage which we will be reading the Pharisees complain to Jesus that the disciples are not properly washing their hands before they eat. Their statement had nothing to do with the spread of germs. The Pharisees were one of the three major Jewish sects at the time.

Pharisees are usually depicted negatively in the Bible as being overly focused on the following of Jewish laws. In the 15th chapter of Matthew the Pharisees were focused on abiding by Jewish dietary laws and they were concerned that the disciples were being too lax.

Jesus then is quoted by Matthew as expressing some very harsh words toward the Pharisees concerning their rigidity. This is where we pick up the story today. As we read this text be aware of the conflict around the issues of abiding by Jewish laws and associating with non-Jewish or Gentile people.

I also alert you to a big disagreement in how to interpret this text. In this text Jesus is going to come across as harsh. The question that interpreters have asked themselves in looking at this text is this. Is the response of Jesus a test of the woman or is Jesus taught something new by this woman that comes up to him? Is Jesus the teacher or is Jesus the student?

Read Matthew 15:10-28

We read here that Jesus goes into the region of Tyre and Sidon. This region was considered pagan territory and elsewhere in the Scriptures this area is described with negative connotations. It is here in this region that a Canaanite woman approaches Jesus. This is a non-Jewish or Gentile woman and someone who the Jews were told to shun.

So it is not surprising that when this woman approaches Jesus the disciples tell him to send her away. But Jesus and the disciples encounter a persistent woman. "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David. My daughter is tormented by a demon."

Now we would expect at this point for Jesus to say something like, "see the faith of this woman? Go, your daughter is made well." But Jesus does not say that. Instead, Jesus responds with what comes across as cruel and harsh words. Jesus responds and says, "I was only sent to the lost sheep of Israel."

The foreign woman pleads with Jesus, "Help me." Jesus responds, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Again, not the response we expect to read from Jesus.

One way that people have interpreted Jesus at this point is that with this comment Jesus is testing this woman to see what will be her response. Maybe so. But maybe not. For the woman responds back to Jesus by saying very cleverly, “Yes, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

Jesus now affirms her faith and heals her daughter.

So which is it? Is Jesus testing her? Maybe? Or is Jesus challenged by her to the point that Jesus learns that his ministry is beyond the Jews to also include the Gentiles as well? And if Jesus learns something here then what are the consequences for us?

What if Jesus wants us to learn new perspectives from people who may see things different from us? If Jesus was willing to have his view of his ministry challenged and was willing to adapt, then what if Jesus is inviting us to have our narrow interpretations of the world challenged and adapted as well?

This video clip we are about to watch is part of a movie put out by the US Department of War which we know now as the Department of Defense. This video was produced in 1947. One could argue that this clip proves that the US military is the real leader when it comes to advocating social progress and challenges us in the church to do the same.

Show video clip <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cYPPZg4xgq8>

In the text of Scripture from Matthew, what if Jesus has his priorities adjusted by the courage of this foreign woman? What if we read this text and conclude that Jesus is loving and always loving but that he learns to expand who he is supposed to express that love to? What if God is using this woman to teach God’s Son?

We continue to be rocked by acts of terrorism around the world and in this country. And the root of this terrorism is learned hatred. We are not born to hate. We learn to hate.

I wonder if one of the gifts that Jesus gives us in this story is the importance of being willing to listen to someone different than us and then being willing to change our opinion. What is it that we are being invited to hear from the person who has a different set of life experiences?

So what if we strived to not hate the person that we perceive is different from us but that we are willing to listen to that person and have our opinions challenged by that person?

God is going to place people in our path whether we want them to be there or not. But maybe they have been placed in our path to teach us something important that we need to learn from them somehow.

As we hear of more and more acts of terrorism that are rooted in hate and fear let us strive to show love and acceptance toward the person who may be different from us somehow. May we be willing to be open to the people that God places in our path and not shun them but rather learn from them and express love towards them.

It may be a person we do not expect who is there to teach us about how to show the fruits of the spirit that we read about from Galatians this morning. It may be the person we may want to shun who may show us how to show love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Who is that person that God is putting in your path and inviting you to listen to? AMEN.

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-Given: August 20, 2017 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)