

11th Pentecost

August 20, 2017

Strange and Wondrous Days

O day and night, but this is wondrous strange!

Horatio in Hamlet Act 1 Scene 5

What, brothers and sisters, shall we make of these wondrous, strange times and these wondrous, strange things happening around us these days? How do we live—and teach our children to live—in a world that seems sometimes to have lost its mind? Where do we go for the wisdom to know our own minds and hearts when we feel lost in storms of conflict and change, when what is right and what is righteous are not always the same thing, when the stark reality of hatred from and towards our neighbors becomes daily fare, and when we are bereft of courage or comfort? Surely the world has never seen such darkness of spirit, such abandonment of mutual respect and affection? Surely it seems strangely appropriate for us to be distracted by the spectacle of eclipse mania, sending millions of us into frenetic activity, challenging thousands of communities across our nation as they prepare to show hospitality to thousands of strangers who will descend upon them to witness the day turning to night—for a few moments—while the rest of us sit at home and wonder at the timing and the meaning of it all? What does all this mean for us, and for our relationships with God and each other? What are we meant to learn? What should we do as God’s people in these strange and wondrous times?

If I had a quick answer for us today, this would be a very short sermon—nearly over already—but no such luck. As much as we might crave simple answers to hard questions, they are not locked away in a box for which only a few have the secret key. Instead they are locked away in our own hearts, and unlocked by the grace found in Word of God.

First today, we have the continuing story of the family of Jacob. Last week we heard the story from Book of Genesis, where Joseph, Jacob’s favorite and very spoiled

son, was sold into slavery by his brothers, who were jealous of his status and their father's favoritism. Feeling cheated and slighted by the injustice of Joseph being treated so special, the sons of Jacob resented and hated him, especially resenting him for having been given a special coat with sleeves that earmarked him for easy house duty—it would never do to get that coat of many colors dirty milking cows or plowing in the mud. Only one of Joseph's older brothers tried to save him from being killed outright, but all were complicit in selling him to human traffickers—for pieces of silver in a strange foretelling of the betrayal of Jesus by Judas. What they could not have expected is that their sin of betrayal would be transformed by God leading Joseph—even though still enslaved—to have an important and influential role in the Pharaoh's kingdom. By his skill and God's grace in his gift of dreams, Joseph predicted the famine that was to threaten a large part of the known world in his time, encouraging a stockpile of grain to secure the survival of the Egyptians. When Jacob's sons were sent by their father to Egypt looking for some solution for the famine that threatened *their* survival, Joseph recognized them and it made him weep. At first they did not recognize Joseph—but he knew them. Joseph had every reason to be living in bitterness and a righteous hatred towards them, but he gave credit to the Lord God for placing him where he was, so that he could be the one to save his family when they needed him. His overtures of reconciliation even went so far as to absolve them of their despicable act, encouraging them to see beyond the burden of their guilt to the salvation and the future of the family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Surely those hate-filled and resentful brothers did not see *that* coming. This strange and wondrous reunion was likely not what any of them expected, yet the grace of God gave Joseph the courage and power to climb out of the darkness of betrayal and abandonment to serve those who would have seen him dead. From the risk of starvation, the sons of Jacob were brought by Joseph's forgiveness back into unimagined saving relationship, and back into hope for their family's future and a life framed by the promises of God.

“It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” In today's gospel, Matthew is pulling some strange and wondrous words out of the mouth of Jesus. And when disciples did not understand, Jesus explained their meaning with a lesson in gastroenterology. Jesus had just had a frustrating conversation with the Pharisees who had been calling out his disciples for

failing to follow the ritual of washing their hands before they ate. The Pharisees were the legal authorities of their time, looking for reasons to exclude Jesus, his teachings and his followers. The modern equivalent would be to follow Jesus in his car and arrest him for a busted tail light, holding him in jail until he could come up with the fine, making him miss work, making it impossible to pay a fine which would increase by the day until its payment was permanently out of reach—all while following the “letter of the law.” Jesus answered their hypocritical complaints by quoting Isaiah to them:

“This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.”

His disciples then warned Jesus to be careful, asking him if he realized that he had offended the Pharisees. Jesus answered that the Pharisees were the blind leading the blind—leaders without an inner vision that comes from the grace of God. Handwashing was small stuff, but that is what they harped on, letting it blind them to the greater sins of ignoring the poor, the sick, the widows and orphans, and anyone else they tried hard to categorize as unclean. Jesus was trying to teach the disciples that what God has made is acceptable in God’s sight—clean in God’s sight, and does not call for religious leaders to make up doctrine to say otherwise.

And then later, Jesus is challenged to eat his own words. Further on down the road, a Canaanite woman begins to harass him, begging him to heal her daughter of a demon. The woman would have been a prime example of one whom the Pharisees considered unworthy of their attention—considered unclean by her very identity—and at first Jesus acts like that, too. Jesus is so fully human in this story—seething with the frustration of being excluded and disrespected by the authorities of record, speaking with a sharp tongue, demonstrating impatience with the disciples and derision of the shouting and demanding woman—equating her with a pesky and obnoxious dog. How familiar it is to us humans, to find ourselves shut out, traumatized, abandoned or abused, and then turn around and find some victim we consider lower than ourselves to shut out, to traumatize, to abandon or to abuse. Whether it is conscious and

organized—or unconscious and complacent—our collective human sin is to project all our anger, our fear, our shame and our resentment we accumulate onto others—and the more unlike us those others are, the less we understand them, the more we de-humanize them, the better a target they become. And in these days of polarizing tribalism, we have lots of options for targets. We all have known a Canaanite woman who has needed something from us, yet was perceived as a threat to our safety, our security, our borders, our job, our neighborhood, our family, our peace and quiet. Even Jesus named the *unfairness* of demonstrating his power on a mere dog. Did he think his efforts would be wasted? Did he think she would not be appreciative enough? Did he think she might take advantage of the situation and get some leftover scraps she had not earned?

And here is where the hard answer comes. Jesus takes a second look and sees a bigger picture. He opens his eyes and shakes off his own blindness. He opens his ears to listen to what the woman says. And he sees her for herself—not just as an annoying dog nipping at his heels. Then he takes her pain and her hope into his own heart—without judgment—*and he is changed*. Jesus—the Son of God yet fully human—vulnerable, weary, uncertain, and yes just a bit arrogant, shows the disciples—and all of us—that the deep source of true healing is found in the willingness to be changed. Wondrously and strangely changed—sometimes by those we fear the most, those we ignore, those we would just as soon forget about, those who have frightened and perplexed us, those who have disappointed and abandoned us; those who are just not *like* us. We are changed by seeing past our own pain and resentment into the heart of another, making ourselves truly present and open to their pain—however wrong or unrighteous or unworthy or hateful we might find them to be. We are changed by God’s grace and compassion through relationship, allowing us to bury old hatreds and resentments, to cross old boundaries, and to find true, deep healing—strange and wondrous.

There may be times when the path to restoration and healing in these strange and wondrous times seems covered by darkness, but it is only for a short time. The light never leaves us; it is an illusion that it has been taken from us—leaving *us* as the blind leading the blind. We know instead that our strange and wondrous God has created us to live in the light—and to love, because he first loved us. And we know that our faith, even when it feels at times as fragile and as desperate as the faith of the Canaanite

woman, assures us that through the saving work of Jesus Christ—the one who could speak truth to power, the one who could cross boundaries, the one who could chase a demon from a child in an instant, the one who could be changed—through Jesus we are assured that the deepest darkness of the cross and grave has already been overcome—once and forever—with the strange and wondrous light of resurrection—and that this is a light so powerful and true that can never be eclipsed, not even for two minutes.

Thanks be to God. AMEN