



20TH SUNDAY A 2008 AUGUST 17, 2008

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ISAIAH 56:1, 6-7

ROMANS 11:13-15, 29-32

MATTHEW 15:21-28

When I came to Charlotte nearly nine years ago, one of the things that first impressed me was the number of “gated” communities here. I’d lived in Boston, Baltimore, D.C., New York, and a few other places, where the crime rate was much higher than here in Charlotte, but where gated communities were rather rare. Maybe it is simply because Charlotte is a “new” city, and having the option to gate or not to gate, gating seemed the wisest thing to do. But, every time I pass one of those communities, I can’t help but think of Robert Frost’s poem, *Mending Wall* with its first line “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.”

Well, what does all of this have to do with our Scripture readings this morning? There are after all no walls mentioned in our readings. True, there are no stone or brick walls in any of our readings but in both our First Reading from Isaiah and our Gospel reading we have figurative walls of exclusion, and the figurative rending of those walls to allow inclusion.

We all know that Yahweh called the people of Israel to be His Chosen People. He separated them from the other nations to be His own. While that seems to be an exclusionary act on God’s part, Israel was meant, as we see clearly in our First Reading from Isaiah, to be the instrument through which other nations would be drawn to Yahweh and become part of the Chosen People. “Foreigners who join themselves to the Lord” following His precepts and holding His covenant will become part of Yahweh’s people sharing in all the benefits of the people of Israel. As clear as that seems to be in Isaiah and elsewhere in the Old Testament, we can easily understand from our readings of the New Testament that Israel kept itself aloof from its pagan neighbors. Even the Samaritans who claimed to worship the same God as the Jews were considered unclean and not to be associated with.

Our Gospel story today from Matthew, the story of the Canaanite women is an expanded version of the one found in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus goes near the Gentile territory of Tyre and Sidon. In the Old Testament these two cities were often the objects of invective by the prophets and were looked upon as prime examples of immorality and corruption. Perhaps, Jesus withdraws to this area since He believes that the Jews will not follow Him and He wants some quiet time with His Apostles. No sooner does He enter the area, however, and He is immediately recognized by this woman who continually cries out, “Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David.” Although she may be a pagan, she is familiar enough with Jewish belief to address Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah of the Jews. Jesus seems uncharacteristically harsh in His words and treatment of this woman. Jesus Himself has just recently been criticized by the Pharisees for not following Jewish tradition, and now He seems bound by that same tradition refusing to speak to her, or acknowledge her presence. But, because the Apostles want to get rid of her Jesus does eventually acknowledge her. His words to her,

however, are offensive to our ear, even though they may have been commonplace among Jews in Jesus' own time, when talking about pagans who because they did not acknowledge and follow the one true God, were looked upon as less than human no better than animals. As she kneels before the Lord, there seems no hesitation on His part to referring to her as a "dog." Yet, she probably would have expected nothing different from a Jewish Rabbi, but that do not deter her. She answers that if she is a dog; even dogs get the scraps for their master's table. The Jesus we know finally comes forth with the warmth and compassion we've come to expect: "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

Ironically just as it was with the Roman Centurion it is with this woman, a Gentile, in whom Jesus encounters deep faith. Moreover she, unlike the Scribes and Pharisees, addresses Jesus with Messianic title of "Lord" and "Son of David". There even seems to be a contrast here between the woman and the Peter we met last week whose faith faltered as he walked towards the Lord on the water. Her faith does not falter, but grows as it meets greater challenges

Today's Gospel marks a turning point in Matthew's Gospel. Up to this point Jesus seemed to direct His teaching and preaching primarily towards the Jews now becomes more universal. It is a universality which eventually leads to Matthew's great commission at the very end of his Gospel to make disciples of all nations which echoes the words of Isaiah in our First Reading.

When Paul wrote his letter to the Romans he was writing not only to Jewish Christians established in Rome or to a Gentile community but to both. Rome was a cultural crossroads where Jews were a minority. Paul argues that, while it is true that many of the Jews rejected Jesus as the awaited Messiah, and therefore, in a sense opened up salvation to the Gentile, to all who would acknowledge Christ as their Lord, the covenant God made with Israel was never revoked. So, Paul reasons that just as any Gentile who believes in Christ receives His mercy, so too any Jew who then or in the future does the same will also receive His mercy. Jew or Gentile, all are the same in Christ, and all are called to be children of God. Christ's sacrifice and reconciliation is meant for all men and women and not just a selected few. All we need be is to be faithful to the love God offers each of us.

Unfortunately men do not always see with the eyes of God, nor do they always pay heed to His word. It didn't take very long for the Christian Church to become separated from its Jewish roots. Certainly our Liturgy still resembles in part the liturgy of the Synagogue with our readings from Scripture which includes both the Old as well as the New Testament. Even our Eucharistic prayer pays homage to the Jewish liturgy of Passover. It did not take long for Christians to start seeing Jews as rejected by God and as "Christ killers", the Christian's enemy. We all know how the Jews of the medieval European ghettos were persecuted. And, we are all aware of how that anti-Semitism came to a head in Nazi Germany. Since that time most Christian Churches and especially the Catholic Church have condemned anti-Semitism in any form as simply being un-Christian. All have called for dialogue and friendship trying to emphasize the Judaic roots of our beliefs.

Our readings this morning are about the universality of God's Love and Grace which should for us underline the importance of the fact that Jesus Christ died for all of us. He died for every man and woman who has ever, and who will ever be born on this earth. Yet, in the name of religion, in the name of God, prejudice continues to be part of our makeup as human beings, and therefore, it is not surprisingly a part of our makeup as Christians.

There are those today who continue to spread the poison of anti-Semitism. There are those today who condemn all Muslims because of the words and actions of radical fanatics. There are those today who sow the seeds of hatred between various groups of Christians, and there are men and women in our own Church who pit Catholics against Catholics and do so all in the name of their Catholic beliefs. If we listen to the words of Christ we can recognize such ideals not only as self-deception but as pure evil. If we can justify prejudice and hatred of people because of their beliefs on a religious level, it becomes very easy for us to justify our own prejudices and hatred of anyone who does not look the way we look, think the way we think, believe what we believe.

Christ came to reconcile us not only to the Father but to one another. John the Evangelist tells us that Jesus asked how we could love God who we do not see, if we do not love our brother and sister who we do see? How difficult is it for us, for you or me to be an instrument of God's reconciliation? None of us seem to live free of the petty hatreds that clog up our lives, and yet we are given the graces to move beyond the walls that prejudice builds so high. It may take time, it will take some self-denial and sacrifice on our part, but if we search for what binds us together rather than what separates us, we might begin to see others with new eyes, the eyes of Christ who sees in every man and woman a brother and sister, a son and daughter of the same Father. We can only do that, however, if we pull down walls and not build them up. Robert Frost was right, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall."