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AMDG

Proper 15A – August 20, 2017

Reading this week's Gospel, in the light of what our nation has been going through this past week, was very uncomfortable, to say the least. And, as I've sat with these readings and the turmoil of the week, I've had some insights I'd like to share.

First, I'll say up front, I found Jesus' behavior in this story horrible. This poor woman with a tormented child begs Jesus for mercy and he ignores her!?! Then, when the disciples tell him to get rid of her, he gives a bigoted dismissal - "I was only sent to minister to *my* people." The woman **is** a foreigner. It makes sense that a Jew would turn his back on Gentiles. But, Jesus!?! And, then when she persists, he calls her a dog!?!

Let me tell you, in the light of what happened in Charlottesville last week, I was hurt and confused to read this Gospel. This isn't the inclusive, extravagant love of God that Jesus taught. How many examples have we heard of Jesus reaching out, embracing, and healing those rejected by others. But, in this story Jesus' first response is to go along with the exclusionary instincts of the crowd.

This week has been a painful one for me. It's opened up old wounds. To see people marching with torches, advocating white-supremacy; to see Nazi flags and salutes; to hear the hateful language of racism - it sent chills through me. I've felt exposed, vulnerable, unsafe. I don't know who to trust. My heart hurt.

As a person of color, I've had my share of encounters with racism over the years. Much of it was less explicit, such as the beloved scout leader who once told me he liked me because I was a "good Mexican." And, there have been plenty of overt instances, as well. Being the first Hispanic family to move into the neighborhood where I grew up, we were targets of vandalism and harassment on several occasions.

Including the neighbor who said we should go back to where we came from - ironic, because there are few families in Southern Arizona who have lived in this region longer than my family has. In my adult life

there have been a number of occasions where it was clear that the color of my skin or my last name determined how I was treated. There was one occasion in particular when I was treated brutally by law enforcement officers simply because I was Hispanic.

I thought this was all a thing of the past, that this mindset was dying in our country. But, the incidents of racial, religious, and ethnic hatred have multiplied in the last year. People of color and of religious and ethnic minorities have all experienced dramatic increases in acts of hatred in the last year - Jewish cemeteries vandalized, mosques destroyed. People of color being harassed and assaulted. I recently read about incidents in the Texas State university system where brown students have had their hair pulled, been spat at, had feces thrown at them, and told to "go back to Mexico." There have been anti-Semitic and white supremacist fliers distributed on the campuses. Other fliers have encouraged students to report undocumented immigrants to federal authorities. These are not isolated incidents. They're happening with increasing frequency all around our country.

So, my first response to what happened in Charlottesville and the aftermath has been sadness...then fear, then anger...and then I started to notice hatred slip in. In seeing white supremacists, Nazis, and Klansmen as other, I noticed hatred start to grow in me. And, that got my attention. I was reminded of the bigotry and discrimination that I've felt. No, I didn't hurl insults or do other overtly hateful things. But I have done and said things that have marginalized others. I have treated people different than me as other, and seen myself as separate and even superior to them. And, whenever we separate, we always include ourselves in the good group don't we? This mindset of included and excluded, worthy and unworthy is what keeps us stuck in the evils of the world. It's a mindset that requires defending, protecting, guarding, it leads to acts of exclusion, violence and hatred. It's opposite of what Jesus taught us by his life, death, and resurrection.

There has to be a set of core values that guides one's thinking, decision-making and actions. It's become clear to me over the past year that people whose core values are rooted in hatred and fear have begun to influence people who do not have firmly rooted core values. As the saying goes, "If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything."

Those whose values are rooted in Jesus can firmly reject any teachings that come from a place of hatred and division. Those whose values are not firmly rooted allow hatred and fear to determine what they think, say, and do. All of us feel anger, resentment, and fear; and we sometimes allow those emotions to drive our thinking and our actions. It's those who have full confidence in God's love and mercy who can push back those demons, reject the evil of hatred and division, and stand up for peace and justice.

In the end Jesus does heal the woman's daughter from afar, and then praises her faith. What happened here? Was he testing the disciples to see if they'd succumb to their primal instincts or testing the woman's persistence? Or was he in process as well, learning from the woman's persistence and getting a deeper understanding of the inclusiveness of his ministry?

I like the idea that Jesus, a human being like us, was also given to the mindset of separateness. And, that he had to work at responding in a more loving and inclusive manner. It teaches me that, while I may fall into bad patterns of thinking, it doesn't make me bad, I can persevere and appeal to the better angels of my nature.

We are living in some dark times. We are constantly being tested to live out the Gospel of love. We must be resolute, vigilant, and relentless in responding to the hatred and fear that is seducing so many. We must explicitly call out racism, bigotry, and hatred as the evils that they are. And, we must resist the temptation to respond to hatred and fear with more hatred and fear. It can seem overwhelming. But, there are always things we can do in our own lives that help spread love and counter hate. These small acts, gently but relentlessly applied, multiply and grow, and ever so subtly help bring about God's heavenly kingdom.

These are some simple suggestions for countering hatred and division in our daily lives. They are simple, but they're not easy.

- Don't participate in language that perpetuates division and hatred such as ethnic or race jokes, Jewish jokes, gender jokes. When others want to engage in this kind of language, speak up, or quietly bow out of the conversation.

- Let go of the language of division and racism. Don't bring up a person's color, ethnicity, or religion in conversation if it isn't pertinent.

Is it really necessary to point out who is Christian and who isn't? Be mindful of the way you refer to people of color. Don't refer to a worker, who happens to be black or Hispanic, as "girl" or "boy," such as, "the nice girl who cleans my house."

- Endeavor to learn about those who have historically been oppressed and marginalized. It's hard to see people as "other" when you understand their stories. Two books I strongly recommend are *The Warmth of other Suns*, about African-Americans who fled the south to northern and western cities in the decades of Jim Crow; and *Decade of Betrayal* about the forced repatriation of Mexican-Americans in the 1930s.

- Most importantly, remember that it's God who is in charge. God, our strength and our shield. We are not in charge; nor are we our own source of power. We're not the source of our core values; God is. Whether we're aware of it or not, whether we understand it or not, God is bringing about his plan of salvation, reconciling all things to God. We are God's unwitting servants, when we're willing to listen and follow. Jesus came to reveal to us the face of God - perfect love. A face that does not see Gentile or Jew, slave or free, woman or man. A face that only sees beloved. And, because God's pure love was revealed to us in human form, it is our face as well. Jesus calls us all to have the same outlook as God, to see everyone as our sister or brother, to regard all as created equally beautiful in the eyes of God. But, because we are hampered by our fears, prejudices, and resentments, we must constantly turn to God, open ourselves to his love and mercy, so we might be guided by the Spirit to do be God's love in the world. Let us pray.

"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."

