

## First Reading

## Acts 10:9-29, 34-45

9 At noon on the following day, as their journey brought them close to the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray.

10 He became hungry and wanted to eat. While others were preparing the meal, he had a visionary experience.

11 He saw heaven opened up and something like a large linen sheet being lowered to the earth by its four corners.

12 Inside the sheet were all kinds of four-legged animals, reptiles, and wild birds. 13 A voice told him, "Get up, Peter! Kill and eat!"

14 Peter exclaimed, "Absolutely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

15 The voice spoke a second time, "Never consider unclean what God has made pure."

16 This happened three times, then the object was suddenly pulled back into heaven.

17 Peter was bewildered about the meaning of the vision. Just then, the messengers sent by Cornelius discovered the whereabouts of Simon's house and arrived at the gate.

18 Calling out, they inquired whether the Simon known as Peter was a guest there.

19 While Peter was brooding over the vision, the Spirit interrupted him, "Look! Three people are looking for you.

20 Go downstairs. Don't ask questions; just go with them because I have sent them."

21 So Peter went downstairs and told them, "I'm the one you are looking for. Why have you come?"

22 They replied, "We've come on behalf of Cornelius, a centurion and righteous man, a God-worshipper who is well-respected by all Jewish people. A holy angel directed him to summon you to his house and to hear what you have to say."

23 Peter invited them into the house as his guests.

The next day he got up and went with them, together with some of the believers from Joppa.

24 They arrived in Caesarea the following day. Anticipating their arrival, Cornelius had gathered his relatives and close friends.

25 As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in order to honor him.

26 But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Get up! Like you, I'm just a human." 27 As they continued to talk, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people.

28 He said to them, "You all realize that it is forbidden for a Jew to associate or visit with outsiders. However, God has shown me that I should never call a person impure or unclean.

29 For this reason, when you sent for me, I came without objection. I want to know, then, why you sent for me."

34 Peter said, "I really am learning that God doesn't show partiality to one group of people over another.

35 Rather, in every nation, whoever worships him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

36 This is the message of peace he sent to the Israelites by proclaiming the good news through Jesus Christ: He is Lord of all!

37 You know what happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism John preached.

38 You know about Jesus of Nazareth, whom God anointed with the Holy Spirit and endowed

with power. Jesus traveled around doing good and healing everyone oppressed by the devil because God was with him.

39 We are witnesses of everything he did, both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, 40 but God raised him up on the third day and allowed him to be seen, 41 not by everyone but by us. We are witnesses whom God chose beforehand, who ate and drank with him after God raised him from the dead.

42 He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.

43 All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

44 While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell on everyone who heard the word.

45 The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.

### **Psalm 67**

Let God grant us grace and bless us;

let God make his face shine on us, Selah

2 so that your way becomes known on earth,  
so that your salvation becomes known among all the nations.

3 Let the people thank you, God!

Let all the people thank you!

4 Let the people celebrate  
and shout with joy  
because you judge the nations fairly  
and guide all nations on the earth. Selah

5 Let the people thank you, God!

Let all the people thank you!

6 The earth has yielded its harvest.

God blesses us—our God blesses us!

7 Let God continue to bless us;

let the far ends of the earth honor him.

### **Gospel**

### **Matthew 15:21-28**

21 From there, Jesus went to the regions of Tyre and Sidon.

22 A Canaanite woman from those territories came out and shouted, “Show me mercy, Son of David. My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession.” 23 But he didn’t respond to her at all. His disciples came and urged him, “Send her away; she keeps shouting out after us.”

24 Jesus replied, “I’ve been sent only to the lost sheep, the people of Israel.”

25 But she knelt before him and said, “Lord, help me.”

26 He replied, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and toss it to dogs.”

27 She said, “Yes, Lord. But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall off their masters’ table.”

28 Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith. It will be just as you wish." And right then her daughter was healed.

## **Sermon**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer: Amen.

After last weeks events in Charlottesville - the horrendous displays of hatred and white supremacy meant to threaten our siblings of color, our Jewish siblings, our migrant and Muslim siblings, as well as the brave response of nonviolent resistance that offered a witness to diversity as God's gift and inclusion as an avenue to peace - I so wished I could be with you. As we saw three deaths - Heather Heyer, an American standing for the rights of all Americans who in 2017 died at the hands of Nazis on American soil, as well as Lt. Jay Cullen and Trooper Berke Batesand, officers who died as they attempted to protect and serve all people - I so wished I could have been with you.

But cancer is an indiscriminate enemy. So I found myself on Sunday at my Karen's bedside as she experienced complications from her latest surgery to root out the cancer in her body.

Fortunately, she's better now, gathering strength at home for the next round of chemo. Even as I was where I needed to be, I felt displaced, wanting to be with you and working through the tragedy after the literally unmasked hate made an appearance here in our own state.

I wanted to be with you because it seems like we just can't learn as a country what Peter learned 2000 years ago, that God shows no partiality to particular racial or ethnic groups. That God's Holy Spirit is poured out on us all, not just on a select few. That Jesus Christ is Lord of all, that God created all of us with loving intention, that the Holy Spirit dwells within us all equally. We somehow can't learn that any attempt to set up ethno-centric states that exclude the equality of others is contrary to the

Gospel, that any word or work that claims racial supremacy is inherently antiChrist, because it is against God's work and word.

So perhaps it's the Holy Spirit's work that the appointed readings from today, the Gospel from a lectionary created decades ago and the reading from Acts that I chose for this series over a month ago, each address race, and in particular, our absolute equality in the eyes of the God who created us.

Remember that we're in a series considering the marks of the church, the outward signs that exhibit our internal identity as God's children. Two weeks ago we talked about being an aspiring church, that we're always trying to be who we're meant to be. Last week we talked about being a scattered church, a church sent in service to God's causes and God's call. In today's readings, we see an unmistakable mark of God's church: the church is diverse, for God's grace is meant for people of every nation and race, every ethnicity and language. The Body of Christ is made up

of many bodies, different shaped bodies, diversely colored bodies, bodies with a multiplicity of language.

So it's incredibly depressing to see Peter's slowness to grasp the inclusive message of the Gospel, though it's also incredibly encouraging to see the propaganda of prejudice flee Peter's mind after he hears the hope of God's inclusive word. Peter's spent much of the book of Acts trying to keep the church pure by forcing converts to accept circumcision and Hebrew dietary laws. Up until this moment, purity took precedence over the pluriform experience of God's grace.

Purity doesn't seem all that bad at first. We often need pure substances for our systems to work properly. On your next work trip, you'd better use pure gasoline in your car, because if it's tainted with sugar or water, it'll ruin your engine and your business plans. Here in this year of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we might also remember that Luther's purpose in

Reformation was to purify false teaching. Pure doctrine was the pursuit of the Reformation. Purity, in some contexts, promotes life.

In those examples, purity is necessary because impurity is deadly, whether to a Buick's engine or a person's relationship with God. But purity isn't a good in itself. Purity isn't meant for all places or spaces; in fact, sometimes purity is dangerous. Pure acid, without a solution, eats through practically any material. Pure sunlight, without the atmosphere, extinguishes life from the face of a planet. **Purity isn't a universal good.**

Imagine being this Canaanite woman coming to Jesus, knowing that he, the one she calls Lord, viewed her as impure. Her presence challenged the very architecture of 1st century Hebrew culture because she was a woman. Because she was a foreigner. Because she had a different ancestry, or at least, it appears as if she has a different ancestry. We'll come back to that soon. Despite their shared language, their existence as



neighbors, their common experience as oppressed people under Roman rule, she was viewed as unworthy of God's presence. This Canaanite woman cries out, "Show me mercy, Son of David. My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession." But Jesus didn't respond to her at all. Then, with the Canaanite woman still within earshot, Jesus gives her an insult that most modern men know not to ever throw at a woman: he calls her a dog, saying that she's not worthy of the food he brings to the children of Israel.

How hard is that to reconcile with the rest of our view of Jesus? Jesus seems unmoved with her request and her presence, so unconcerned by her presence that he knowingly insults her. Nevertheless, she persisted. This Canaanite woman reminds Jesus of every dog owner's affection: "C'mon Jesus. Everyone feeds their dog under the table." It's clever. It's cunning. But it's also compelling for a much more personal reason for

Jesus. As Mitzi Smith, a black womanist New Testament scholar notes, this Canaanite woman's reminder of affection also reminds Jesus of something else: three people named in his genealogy, which we read in Matthew 1, are Canaanite women as well. Jesus owes his very existence to Rahab, Tamar, and Ruth, to Canaanite women just like this woman from the region of Tyre and Sidon. This woman reminds Jesus that her blood is his blood too, that the blood that runs through his veins is Hebrew and Canaanite, that the very first Body of Christ was interracial, and that indeed is a blessing!

That same Hebrew Jesus, converted to his own Gospel by his own Canaanite relative, later appears to Paul in Acts and convinces him that he "should never call any person impure or unclean." That God never intended ethnic superiority. That Jesus never designed racial supremacy. That there's nothing inherent to our DNA that makes us better than anyone else. That, in fact, the

Lord made each of us in our diversity as unique images of God, as clean, as holy, as beloved.

The Body of Christ is, at its core, diverse. Jesus himself was interracial, and so too the church as the Body of Christ must be interracial. All God's children bear a particular reflection of their creator. It is impossible to follow Jesus and espouse racial superiority. Bigotry against people for the color of their skin, their religious background, the language they speak, their ethnic heritage, is ultimately bigotry against Jesus. Purity is not a universal Christian ideal.

The point here friends is this: the Gospel is a word that unites us amidst our diversity, that we're called to celebrate the God-given differences we find in others rather than denigrate them as impure. The Holy Spirit makes the Hebrew Paul see the divine spirit in the Roman Cornelius. Jesus's mission explodes to new horizons when he realizes, through this Canaanite woman,

that God's promise to Abraham would be accomplished in himself. God intended to bless all nations, all races, through Abraham, a promise that remained unfulfilled until Jesus came on the scene. This was a seismic shift in Jesus's worldview, for perhaps the first time he realized that God's mission wasn't just to Jerusalem, but the the very ends of the earth.

God intends to unite diverse peoples, not by taking away what makes them special, but instead by highlighting the beauty and vitality of all God's creatures. The only thing that the Gospel can't tolerate is intolerance. Intolerance has no ability to appreciate the different images of God that exist within other people. Intolerance has no intent to be transformed by the renewing of our minds through the work of Christ Jesus. Intolerance has no place in the Kingdom of God.

But like Peter, and even like Jesus, we must admit that we're still learning. Our ELCA is 96% white. As a country, we still write

off the feelings of Black students forced to attend Stonewall Jackson Middle School in Roanoke, named after a man that killed to keep them as property, or walk past confederate monuments and flags on the way to voting centers and state houses. We still ignore the prejudice faced by our Jewish friends in faith, whose plight for true safety didn't end with the formation of Israel or the defeat of Germany, but indeed is still rampant across the globe and here at home. When we hear them cry out for help, for recognition, for dignity, we too often, like Jesus did with this Canaanite woman, refuse to respond. It's easier to leave the monuments up, to ignore the names of the school, to point out the relative progress compared to WWII.

But let me be clear about something. When you ignore these things, you ignore me too. One of my ancestors was Jewish, a fact that my great grandfather wrote about in his diaries as he traveled the world and recorded his experiences on safari in

Africa and starting a university in Japan. But you see, a great aunt of mine let fear and prejudice harden heart, and she so wanted to hide from this truth in the rise up to WWII that she burned all these journals, trying to erase our diverse heritage. I lost my history, my family, due to the hatred bred within my own kin. I can't even tell you this ancestor's name, but I know their blood runs through my veins. So to ignore the cries of "Jews will not replace us" under nazi flags, stars and bars, and tiki torches is to ignore me. To ignore "blood and soil" chants under swastikas and flaming crosses is to ignore my black cousin Jason, who's married to my Korean cousin Jenny, who have two beautiful interracial children Jordan and Jaxson. To ignore the pain suffered by our diverse members of this Body of Christ is to ignore Christ's call to diversity.

But you know who I'm thankful for? I'm thankful for the Canaanite woman who persists, who sees the Gospel even more

clearly than Jesus himself. I'm thankful for those who cry out against those signs and acts of prejudice, who refuse to relent until the Body of Christ as the church reflects the interracial body of Christ that walked the earth 2,000 years ago. I'm thankful that, in my prejudice, in our country's lack of compassion, there are still Canaanite women crying out about the bigotry they experience in words and deeds, in statues and flags, in systems and in society, because they see the Gospel even more clearly than we do. May we, like Jesus, heed their call, and say, "It will be just as you wish."