

The Hard Work of Justice, Matthew 15:10-28
Saint Mark's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Patricia Matthews
Sunday, August 20

This has been a trying week. The events of Charlottesville and Barcelona have made many of us weary. And some of us came here today, hoping that the church will show us a way to think and respond to all of this.

And we may be hoping for an easy and uplifting gospel reading. Sorry. Instead, we are faced with Jesus calling a woman a dog. Maybe next week.

Now, I don't know about you, but especially after this week, I would prefer to look away from that piece of the story. It doesn't make us feel great. But what we are learning as a nation is that we cannot ignore the hard parts of the story. That leads to blindness. So we aren't going to look away. Instead, we are going to look closely, because what we will find is that it is precisely in this difficult Gospel moment that we get a glimpse of the fullness of who Jesus is and the mystery of what God is up to in the world.

According to Matthew, Jesus has arrived at this point in his life, having begun to identify himself as the Messiah that has been sent to save, specifically, the lost sheep of Israel. That's no small task.

But then this woman comes along. She is not Jewish, and yet she wants Jesus to heal her daughter. The disciples respond to her out of their cultural bias; they tell her to get away. Jesus, too, tells this woman that he isn't going to give the dogs food that belongs to the children. He isn't going to heal a non-Jewish person, because his food is for the Jews.

This moment is difficult, but very important, because it reveals an aspect of Jesus' fully human nature: that he has grown up within a cultural context, just as we all do. All humans pick up information from the people, places, and times they are in. As we get older, our ideas are challenged as we are exposed to the broader world. And through this process, we keep some lessons learned in childhood and discard others. And Jesus' humanity is no different.

So when we get to this important moment when he sees that his cultural education is actually causing another person pain, he quickly lets go of an uninformed idea gained in childhood - thus expanding the fullness of his humanity - and he heals her daughter - thus revealing the fullness of his divinity.

Fully human and fully divine. Tricky stuff. Theologians Owen Thomas and Ellen Wondra say that "orthodox Christianity does not attempt to explain how these two natures are united in one person." It simply tries "to point to where the mystery is revealed." And this moment is one of those places. In the mystery of this moment, Jesus expands what it means to be human: to accept others who are different from us, and he reveals how God's divinity works in the world: healing beyond all barriers we humans have invented.

Furthermore, in this moment, Jesus reveals that we, in the fullness of our humanity and with God's help, are capable of growing beyond our limited vision and developing an ability to love the whole world. That's the arc Jesus' life takes - because by the end of Matthew, Jesus has

embraced the reality that he is the Savior for all the world. His grace has expanded beyond imagining. And he is commanding his disciples to go out into all the world and share this knowledge, to do the hard work of going beyond what they think they know. And he asks the same of us: to see the nature of his unconditional love and to share it with everyone.

I have a friend, Reverend Elaine Thomas, who is an Episcopal priest in Charlottesville. She has been in the center of all things there. We were in touch this week. She said this has all been pretty intense, but they are holding together. I told her I was preaching this week, and I asked her what she would like us to know here in Arkansas. Her response was short and clear. She said, please tell your people that “now is the time to do the hard work of justice.”

Now is the moment to ask how we, as a church, are committed to the hard work of justice, to living into our full humanity, of going beyond what we think we know.

Here at Saint Mark’s, we have begun this work of pushing against the barriers we humans develop. For the last year, we have been nurturing a real relationship with St. Mark Baptist, a predominately African-American church just across Interstate-630, that very literal barrier in our city. In a few weeks, we are hosting the *Love thy Neighbor* event, where people from all religions will be together in these pews. We have begun.

But our vestry is challenging us to do even more. You should know that they are asking hard questions - like what can the church do to help end the violence in Little Rock. They are dreaming about expanding next year’s budget - with an eye on doing more of this type of reconciling work in the world. I have full faith that by asking these questions, and with the financial support of this community during our stewardship season, we will find a way to be an even greater force of love in this city.

But it is not enough for the church to act. Each of us must stay alert to moments that reveal the barriers that live in our hearts. God longs to free us from all of these spaces. How that looks will be different for each of us. It may be uncomfortable. But discomfort is usually a good litmus test that tells us we are walking on the Gospel path.

Our work may be something as private as naming out loud the fear that arises in us when we see someone walking toward us on the sidewalk who does not look like us. It may mean being honest with ourselves about why so many of our Facebook friends look exactly like us. It may mean being physically present in a neighborhood we might otherwise avoid. But each time we make that decision, to look honestly at our activity in the world, we are participating in the hard work of justice, and we are opening ourselves up to transformation.

Our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry reminded us this week that these moments of crisis are times of decision. Jesus has shown us the way, and Curry says that people of good will, following the way of love, can find the way to be a shining beacon for the world. We can still believe in the hope of making the Beloved Community of God a reality in our world.

He sent out a resource for congregations this week. We have a few copies at the back of the church. This resource outlines how we can begin to address barriers. Take it, use it at home, at work, in small groups at this church - because in this resource, Curry challenges us to follow the path of Jesus, asking:

“Will you persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?” Bishop Curry wants us to honestly ask ourselves that question, and to unflinchingly apply that label of evil to all biases that harm other people. He has full hope that if we do, we can change the world.

And when he asks us, “Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?”, that’s a real question, too. As Christians, we are called to repair the breach in our world. And Curry believes we can do this.

You may recognize these questions from our baptismal covenant. And it just so happens that today we have baptisms.

So in a few minutes, when we hear these questions, maybe they will remind us:

That we get to do this hard work of justice together.

We don’t do it alone.

We step into a long line of people who strive for justice and peace.

And we do it all, with God’s help.

Now is the time.