

Worship Service “*Blessed Bits*”

Pentecost 12, Sunday, Year A

20th August 2023

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8 NRSVUE / Matthew 15:21-28 NRSVUE

Prelude

Opening Music (Video)

[*For Everyone Born*](#) By Shirley Erena Murray,

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Welcome/Announcements

Pass the Peace

Opening Hymn

Holy, Holy, Holy!

120

Call to Worship (responsive)

One: Come and worship, all you who love and serve the Lord—

All: **outsiders and insiders, old-timers and new-comers, the young, old and the in-between.**

One: Come as you are, for this is God’s house—

All: **a house of prayer for all people, and God welcomes each one who comes.**

Invocation

With open arms You welcome all who call on Your name—who acknowledge You as Lord, and look to You in faith. No one stands outside the circle of Your mercy and love. And so we come to offer You our worship—to declare that You are our God, and that we are Your people, called and chosen by You from the very beginning. Through the presence of Your Holy Spirit open our eyes to see You here; open our minds to receive Your truth, and our mouths to speak and sing Your praise. For You alone are God—worthy of all praise and worship, now and to the end of time. Amen.

Our First Testament reading this morning from the prophet Isaiah gives us an early indication of the inclusiveness of God's salvation and providence. As we listen to these words, let's think about how we might limit the inclusion of others in our own journeys.

First Testament Reading Isaiah 56:1, 6-8 NRSVUE

Thus says the LORD: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come and my deliverance be revealed.

And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath and do not profane it and hold fast my covenant—

these I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar, for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

Thus says the Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel: I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

A Time of Prayer

Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer (resources)

Merciful God, In love You created us, and in love You sustain us, day after day. So it is with confidence that we bring our prayers to You, knowing that You will hear and respond.

We pray for those who are estranged from spouse or family, friends or neighbors; who find it difficult to forgive past wrongs done to them;

We pray for those who for years have carried feelings of guilt or regret for something they did or something they neglected to do; who find it difficult to ask for forgiveness or forgive themselves;

For those who find themselves far away from You, struggling to overcome their doubts or disillusionment, and who wonder how to find their way back;

For those watching someone they love try to cope with serious illness or injury, and who long for Your miraculous intervention;

For the many others in our world who are suffering this day—from grief, or loneliness, hunger, poverty, violence or illness; God, in Your mercy, hear our prayer.

Sustain all those who look to You in hope. And strengthen us—Your people—so that we may be a light to all those who find themselves in darkness. In the name of of Jesus Christ, the light of the world. Amen.

Our gospel lesson this morning is a well-known story, the feeding of the five thousand. As we listen to this story, let's think about what nourishment we value, and how we share that nourishment with others.

Gospel Lesson Matthew 15:21-28 NRSVUE

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.

Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon."

But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us."

He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."

He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed from that moment.

Message – *Blessed Bits*

When we think of church, what is it that we like? For many of us, it would be spending time in fellowship with people we have become friends with over time. But what was it that first attracted us? More than likely, it was a worship service that felt comfortable. A place where we felt welcome, where we understood the routine, and maybe even knew some of the songs. It had a structure we were familiar with, and rituals that we could fit into very easily. For many, it may also have been a place with people who believed as we do, whose sense of ethics and morality reflected the same values we were raised with or have come to embrace in our own lives. A moral compass that guides our actions and way of thinking about things. But what happens when someone comes to visit who has a different background or outlook? How does that comfort and familiarity impact their experience?

In our gospel lesson this morning from Matthew, this is the scenario Jesus is experiencing in his encounter with the Canaanite woman. On the surface, Jesus' reaction can seem harsh and callous. But it's important to consider the context from which it came. Judaism in the first century was very focused on seeking to define what it meant to be Jewish, on

what that identity entailed. Having had their first temple destroyed, then exiled for years in a foreign country, only to then be dominated by a series of foreign empires, many struggled to hold on to what defined them as a culture and a people. The only thing they had left were the holy texts handed down to them from the previous generations that relayed the core of what made them unique, of what they could find comfort in. So the leadership of their faith continued to refine exactly what rules and practices they followed that gave them that unique identity, that common point from which they could find community and fellowship. They knew what was expected of them, and what set them apart from the domination of the world around them. A domination that often determined so many other aspects of their lives, and too frequently looked down upon them as a subjugated people. For them, the arrival of Jesus brought the prophesied hope of redemption, of the fulfillment of the covenant made with them in antiquity by their Creator. However, when you set criteria to define what is acceptable and what is not, when you set what is considered the norm, you inevitably also establish criteria for what is not, and you by definition set criteria for exclusion.

It's into this setting that we have this exchange between Jesus and this foreign woman. The primarily Jewish audience of Matthew's Gospel would see nothing wrong with Jesus' initial reaction. When she first petitions him, he ignores her completely. That after all, is the proper response for a Jewish rabbi of the day. First of all, he would never address a woman directly without first having the proper introduction and permission of her male relatives. To do otherwise would dishonor them both. Second, to engage with a Gentile is to risk contaminating oneself according to those ever-refined purity laws. And finally and not so laudably, because they were not observant Jews, the prevailing attitude was they were no better than filthy dogs, not worthy of acknowledgment. Which makes the disciples' reaction understandable from that perspective, though certainly not compassionate in any sense of the word. But that's what the expected response would have been.

She's not one of them, she doesn't belong. She knows the rules but still isn't following the established protocol. She needs to be sent away. Yet she shows she knows and understands the tenets of their own faith better than they do. She reminds them of the words of the prophet Isaiah we heard earlier. There is room at the table for those outside who believe and follow the God of Israel.

She is an example of the words of Hosea 6:6 that Jesus has quoted earlier to the Pharisees, that "God desires mercy, not sacrifice," that they worship a God who states in Exodus 33 that "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." They follow a God who favors that compassion and mercy over following staid and strict rules. They believe in a Creator who prefers reaching out over ritual.

While we may find Jesus' initial reaction troubling, this interaction would really hit home for Matthew's audience who were members of a faith that was experiencing an ever

increasing Gentile membership. The easy way was to stick to what's comfortable, to the rules and rituals they have always known. After all, it's worked for them all these centuries, why can't it work for these newcomers? The Canaanite woman highlights the problem with that approach. What crumbs can she find nourishment from? And what crumbs do outsiders find in the church of today?

If we're honest with ourselves, while we may like the occasional change up in the service, we too find comfort and identity in the rituals and practices that we have become so accustomed to. We like knowing what to expect, how things work. We know the age-old songs and structure, and we can follow along easily. We've had years of covering the same scripture in the same order, and we know the lessons well. But what if we were someone coming in from the outside? Would we have the same level of comfort and security? Would we feel included or would we feel compelled to conform to someone else's sense of identity and comfort? And if we are truly honest with ourselves, we may find that we too have our own sense of those who don't really belong, those who are just too different to fit into our sense of what is acceptable. Like the Pharisees, how do we refine our rules and dogma to exclude those who make us uncomfortable, whose identity just doesn't fit into what we were raised or come to understand as acceptable?

We love to say we welcome all, but how far does that welcome and acceptance go? Certainly that doesn't imply that we don't have moral guidelines and ethics, but do those guidelines inherently exclude, and are they really reflective of a merciful and compassionate God as revealed in scripture?

Our scripture today invites us to examine ourselves, in the same way the followers of Matthew would have been led in their context, in the same way Jesus' reaction would have led the original disciples to reflection on their perspective. Do we have a tinge of Pharisee in our way of thinking? Is it enough to just give some crumbs to certain people, while welcoming others who are more like us to sit at the table? While our first impression of Jesus' actions in today's story may be confusing and troubling, he was very consistent in the tables he frequented. They were not the comfortable, secure tables of people just like him. They were more often the tables of those who were the outsiders, the unclean and unworthy of his day. As the body of Christ in today's world, we are called by this story to think about who we seek to be at our table. After all, we live in a culture whose public dialog seems to seek exclusion. Though instead of "Samaritan dogs," we hear things like "LGBTQ pedophiles" Is our table inviting to those who aren't like us, who don't fit into our mold? If not, what can we do to make it a table that gives the same comfort and security to all? What changes can we make to make our table more inviting, more inclusive for those who are not like us?

Matthew ends his gospel with the Great Commission calling us to share the gospel with ALL people, regardless of their background and identity. Is that the scope of our table? As I held a meeting recently concerning baptism, the question was asked of me, "Can an

LGBTQ person be baptized?” My response was “Why wouldn't they be able to?” And if the Samaritans of our day are good enough to join the body through the ordinance of baptism, is there anything they can't do in the church? I hope and pray we all work on ourselves as individuals to root out the ways in which we exclude, and work together to make our community a more comfortable place where anyone walking through our doors or logging on at home can feel the same inclusion and full fellowship that has such deep meaning for us. May it be so. Amen.

Call to Serve

The prophet Isaiah proclaimed that God's house is “a house of prayer for all peoples.” And it is in such a place where offerings are acceptable to God. Here, in this place of extravagant welcome, may our offerings of time, energy, money, resources, skills, hope, and prayer be lifted up to our God. May they be discerned for the good that ripples out beyond our walls and felt by all who enter them.

As we listen to this interlude played by Annie, let's give some thought to how we might practice more radical welcome in our own lives.

A Time for Reflection

The Prayer of Thanksgiving

God, You've given each one of us unique gifts and abilities and have called us to unique settings— our homes, schools, neighborhoods and places of employment.

Just as You used Joseph's abilities to fulfil Your purposes in Egypt long ago, we pray that You would use us, too. Take our gifts, our time and our resources. Use them—and us—as You see fit so that, through us, Your Kin-dom might come and Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Amen.

Hymn

***For the Healing of the Nations* 367**

Benediction

This is what the Lord says: *Be just and fair to all. Do what is right and good, for I am coming soon to redeem you, and to reveal My righteousness to all. So go to love and serve the Lord and one another. And may the blessing of God— be with you and among you all. Amen.*

Postlude