

Jordan Station United Church
Sunday, November 8, 2020
We Make the Road by Walking by Brian McLaren
Week/Chapter 11
“From Ugliness, A Beauty Emerges”
Scripture: Deuteronomy 7:1-11 & Matthew 15:21-39

Today’s reading that John offered to us is described by Brian McLaren is this way. “It is a story of conquest, as the Israelites finally reach the land their ancestors had inhabited four centuries earlier. There’s just one problem; others have moved into the land and made it their home for many generations. To possess the land, the Israelites will have to displace these current residents through a war of invasion and conquest. Wars like these are the most bloody and difficult of all, but the Israelites trust that God will give them victory.

This episode in the biblical story, more than any other, forces us to deal with one of life’s most problematic questions: the question of violence. By violence, we mean an act that intends to violate the well-being of a person or people. To help some, is God willing to harm others? Is God part of the violence in the world, and is violence part of God?” (Chapter 11 pages 46-47)

These are difficult days across the world, aren’t they? So much war, so much anger, so much distrust from nation to nation and from culture to culture. So much hatred and violence perpetrated against God’s people and the planet.

At a National level, we see white fishing companies and its leaders lighting an Indigenous community’s lobster stock warehouse on fire. At a more frightening level, we see World leaders posturing and issuing threats to one another, bringing the world to the brink of utter catastrophe. We only need to look to the USA to see white supremacists and Nazi sympathisers in Charlottesville invoking violence to try and defend a heritage that is simply indefensible. And time and time again, we see refugees and immigrants scapegoated for so many of the ills in society across so many countries, and displaced, vulnerable people so often being treated no better than animals.

Racism, xenophobia and fear of other cultures is undoubtedly on the rise and being vocalised across the world on a scale not witnessed for many generations. Fear of The Other. Fear of what we do not know, what we do not understand.

So, what are we to make of the passage in Deuteronomy 7 where God commands Joshua to slaughter the seven Canaanite nations? “God, your God, will turn them over to you and you will conquer them. You must completely destroy them, offering them up as a holy destruction to God. Don’t make a treaty with them. Don’t let them off in any way.” (Deuteronomy 7:2)

Many religious scholars argue that the point is that God gave these nations the 430 years Israel was captive in Egypt to repent, and even an additional 40 years as Israel wandered

in the wilderness between Egypt and Canaan. When people steadfastly refuse to respond to God and repent, time runs out and final judgment is experienced. For them, they assume because the Bible makes these claims, that we must defend them as true and good.

Brian McLaren argues that “that approach, however is morally unacceptable for growing numbers of us, and fortunately, we have another option. We can acknowledge that in the minds of the originators of these stories, God as they understood God did indeed command these things. We can acknowledge that in the way of thinking, divine involvement in war was to be expected.” I am sure that is what all those young men who went off to every war this world has seen thought that very same thing. That they were serving their country and even their God. We can and indeed must remember this sacrifice but as was so poignantly described in the video today, I think the point is that we need to remember what happened in the past so we don’t revert to them in the future. Lest we forget the sacrifice and the devastation of war.

Sermon Part 2:

Scripture: Matthew 15:21-39

It is important for us to read both scriptures this morning because we can’t stop there. We can’t stop at the moment of remembering because lest we forget or else continue this pattern for another 470 years.

So, this morning we remember the Cannanite Woman, who comes to Jesus begging for her daughter to be healed – she is the “other”, other religion, in fact by referring to her as a Cannanite woman – the people around Jesus would have known and remembered that there aren’t any Cannanites’ left, they had been wiped out, eradicated and had their land taken when the people of God entered into a conquest for their land under Joshua after leaving the wilderness.

But we don’t have to stop there. As Christians, we want to present a God who transcends racism and xenophobia. We want to present a church that is bigger than ignorance and hatred. We want to model a way of living that shows hospitality and kindness to those of other cultures, and those whose culture we may not understand. We want to fight for justice and peace for all.

My colleague Rev Dr Steve Griffiths wrote the following words and I thank him for his gift of helping me to understand this passage more clearly. I have paraphrased them. He began with a question...

If the Church will not take the lead in fighting for justice especially at this moment in time – then who will?

And so, in the light of that, we might find this morning’s Gospel reading more than a little embarrassing. Because the underlying emotions running through this passage are emotions of

fear of another culture and a desire to ignore and not interact with someone from that other culture.

We perhaps wish that Jesus and the disciples would behave a bit differently - but they don't. We are embarrassed by their actions.

Think about Jesus first. He doesn't come across as a particularly pleasant character, does he? He doesn't seem to take the woman's pain very seriously. He uses derogatory language when he addresses her and it appears at first glance as if he is being racist in his approach. That's not the Jesus we know, love and follow.

And, quite frankly, his disciples are even worse...They are clearly acting in a racist and xenophobic way and they seem to believe that they have superiority as Jews over other races and they don't want to engage on any level with this outsider in their midst.

So why on earth does Matthew include this story in his Gospel? There were plenty of other stories he could have told – much nicer ones. So why does he include this one? What does Matthew want us to learn from this uncomfortable encounter?

So, the disciples in this story were feeling nervous and disorientated - and then things get more difficult for them, as we read in verse 22: "A Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting..." This is getting worse and worse for them...They are in a foreign place, outside of their comfort zone and a woman comes up to them and starts shouting: a Gentile woman shouting at Jewish men: what on earth is going on here? All the social rules are being broken here and everyone – disciples, Jesus and woman – are outside of their own comfort zones.

And what is Jesus' response? Nothing – absolutely nothing...verse 23: "But he did not answer her at all". How could Jesus appear so indifferent to the genuine anguish of another human being? We don't know. The text tells us absolutely nothing to justify or explain why Jesus remains as passive as he does.

But we do know is that Jesus had a change of heart. "Woman, great is your faith!", says Jesus. She is from a different religion; she is from a different culture and yet Jesus recognizes that her faith is great. How challenging is that for us as Christians...to read a passage where Jesus commends the faith of a woman from a different religion? What does that mean for us in this diverse, multi-cultural society in which we now live?

This woman who Jesus encounters doesn't want to become a follower of Jesus. She doesn't want to change her religion. She doesn't want to abandon her culture: why should she? And Jesus never asks that of her. Instead, she remains within her culture, remains within her own faith and Jesus reaches out to her exactly where she is and meets her spiritual needs right there. He offers peace and healing without strings attached. He doesn't try to convert her to his faith. Instead, he honours her faith and heals her within that.

So, what's the point? The boundaries of the Church are much broader than we might think they are.

The Church does not contain people who only look like us, behave like us, worship like us, express faith like us. We are a part of the Church – but we do not represent the sum total of the Church. The Church is much bigger and broader and inclusive than we could ever imagine.

Isn't that the story of the Christian church throughout history? You are welcome to join: but here are the rules of belief, and the rules of behaviour. The church throughout history, throughout the world, has too often behaved like a club with membership rules and many local churches operate like a clique where people are expected to conform in order to belong.

But that is the exact opposite of what Jesus is doing in this story. In this story, Jesus reaches out and meets the woman in her culture. He doesn't ask her to join the club, he doesn't set any provisos for the welcome, he just accepts her as she is, shows compassion and grace and allows her to continue in her own cultural way of being.

But more than that, it appears that Jesus and the disciples are open to learning from this woman from another culture. They don't just tolerate the difference - they actively engage with it, are prepared to be challenged by it and to allow themselves to grow through this cross-cultural interaction; finding new roads towards reconciliation and peace.

So, we end with the very question that we began with: why did Matthew include this story in his Gospel?

Perhaps he wanted us to learn the very simple truth that those we consider to be 'outsiders' can teach us about God. Perhaps he wants us to realise that we have more to learn from others than we have to teach them. And so, Matthew includes this story because he wants us to follow the example of Jesus and embrace outsiders, both so that we can show God's love to them as well as learn from them.

Society is enriched by the conversation. Our faith is enriched by the conversation. The world will be more peaceful if only we can learn to see the face of God in the other. Together we can ensure that from ugliness a beautiful future can emerge.

Thanks be to God. Amen