



**THE ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
AUGUST 16, 2020
MATTHEW 15: 21-28
“CANAANITE LIVES MATTER”**

Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.”

Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.”

He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”

The woman came and knelt before him. “Lord, help me!” she said.

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

“Yes it is, Lord,” she said. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

Then Jesus said to her, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed at that moment.

SERMON

Last Sunday night, I had a zoom reunion with sixteen of my friends from junior high and high school. We spent three hours catching up, agreeing to zoom again after the presidential election.

We discussed marriages, divorces, children, health issues, and careers. We shared memories of our time together as adolescents and young adults. Although we grew up together in Columbus, Ohio, we now live from New York to Los Angeles.

Careers include attorneys, artists, musicians, and entrepreneurs.

Sixteen of us. One Lutheran pastor and fifteen Jews.



Yes, my best friends throughout junior high and high school were Jews.

For our reflection this morning, it isn't important how and why they became my best friends or how and why more than fifteen Jews included me in their tribe.

What is important for our reflection is your reaction when I revealed that these guys are Jews.

Because there is far too much anti-Semitism in this country and throughout the world.

Those of us in Pittsburgh are aware of the murder of Jews at worship at Tree of Life Synagogue. By an assault by a white supremacist. Anti-Semitism has increased in this country with the rise of the alt-right.

But anti-Semitism exists throughout history. The early Christian movement saw Judaism as a competitor and so adopted an oppositional stance. Enmity continued, through programs in Europe and Russia, by Martin Luther and other reformers, eventually culminating in the holocaust.

Caricatures arose of Jews as money-hungry, as controlling the banking and entertainment fields, as part of the illuminati that control the world. The paranoia and projections are endless.

So why did I experience and continue to experience my Jewish friends as some of the brightest, funniest, generous, and kindest people I have ever met?

Because I spent time face-to-face getting to know them as individuals. As human beings.

What we have to work through as people of faith is the deep tribalism that lurks in the darkness of our souls. And that's what we'll look at this morning.

A good example would be the Ten Commandments. Originally, these commandments were meant for the twelve tribes of Israel. They were tribal laws. Thou shalt not kill was an in-house command. Don't kill your fellow Israelites.



But anyone outside the tribe? Have at it. And, if you know anything about the Old Testament, you know that it is full of stories where the Israelites laid waste to entire villages of enemies of their tribe, right down to women, children, and livestock.

Think of Lutherans who immigrated to this country. Did we create one great Lutheran church? Heck, no! We had to establish German Lutheran congregations, and Finish Lutheran congregations, and Swedish Lutheran congregations, and Norwegian Lutheran congregations and Slovak Lutheran churches. We gathered only with members of our own tribe.

Instinctually, we are loyal to our own tribe. And, it appears we all have difficulty reaching out and relating to members of other tribes....

When we look at the story of the Canaanite woman and Jesus, we find Jesus struggling to reach out beyond his own tribe!

Matthew refers to the geographical location of our story as “tire and Sidon.” The first century folks who first heard this story would understand that the inhabitants of tire and Sidon were an intelligent, skilled people, used by God to offer help to the Israelites in time of need. On the negative side, though, they were often described as enemies of Israel, primarily because of their worship of foreign gods.

In the first century, the term “Canaanite” was recognized as a vicious epithet toward anyone who was considered contemptible to the Jews.

Akin to whites using the n-word when referring to blacks.

A Canaanite woman approaches Jesus for him to heal her daughter, who is suffering terribly. We don’t know exactly what her suffering entailed, since first century folk saw many personal problems as caused by demons.

Jesus ignores her. Jesus publically shuns her. Jesus has been culturally conditioned by his upbringing to reject Canaanites as human beings worthy of respect.



His disciples are no different. Rather than responding with empathy to her agonizing cries for assistance, they are annoyed, “Jesus, send her away. She’s bugging us.”

And again, Jesus rejects her, “I’m only here for the people of Israel.”

But she insists, “Please help me.”

Jesus then insults her by comparing her to a little dog trying to take the bread from the table set for the Israelite children.

In the traditional Middle Eastern culture, dogs are almost as despised as pigs. Pigs are worse, but only slightly so. Dogs are never pets. They are kept as half-wild guard dogs or left to wander unattended as dangerous street scavengers who subsist on garbage.

Neglecting the woman is one thing. But to insult her with such language is something else.

In her love for her daughter, in her suffering, in her humanity, she persists through the neglect and the insult, “even the little dogs catch the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.”

Her love for her daughter, her basic goodness, her humanity breaks through Jesus’ cultural conditioning. He has compassion for the Canaanite. He experiences that she is no different from a mother of his tribe. His heart is opened and he grants her request for healing.

Canaanite lives matter....

We all start out as members of our own tribe. This is necessary for our identity formation.

I am of German heritage. I am a Caucasian male. I was raised as a Lutheran Christian. I am an American.



This is my baseline. My starting point. These tribal designations are foundational to my sense of who I am.

And we all need to grow up with a sense of solid tribal identity. It aids in the development of our self-esteem, our sense of belonging.

Yet, as we see from our story this morning, our spiritual work is to do the hard work of maintaining our tribal identity and growing beyond it.

As a Jew, Jesus works through it to show his first disciples and us that Canaanite lives matter.

It seems to me that the more secure we are in our identity, the easier it is to stretch from our tribe to accept another tribe.

And, the more experience we have with members of another tribe, the less afraid we are to open ourselves to that tribe.

One way to think about prejudice is that prejudice comes from too little information. When we don't grow up beside people from different tribes, we don't gather enough of our own personal experiences.

We're vulnerable to coming to our own misguided generalized conclusions, repeating other folks' ill-formed opinions, or basing our perspective on one bad experience. Funny how we don't do this with members of our own tribe.

Funny how we white people often don't think twice about the bad behavior of white people.

I'm reminded of a story about Tony Campoli. He was tired of listening to conservative evangelicals criticizing what they considered the terrible behavior and outrageous costumes during gay pride parades.

His response was to suggest that they look at the terrible behavior and outrageous costumes of straight people during Mardi Gras.



It is hard spiritual work to drop the prejudice, to correct the bigotry that infects the human race.

As I hung out with my Jewish friends, as I got to know their families, as I went to worship at the Jewish old folks home, I got to know them as human beings from another tribe. Their lives, different from mine, matter.

When I saw my Lutheran pastor's friendship with Rabbi Folkman of temple Israel, I grew in my respect for the Jewish faith.

In the best of all worlds, we are secure in our own tribal identity. And then we have an expansive openness to members of other tribes.

We need people with a spiritual and cultural curiosity.

What are the values, the traditions, the outlook on life of other tribes?

How do other tribes think about what matters in life?

How do we build bridges of communication with other tribes?

At heart, we are one people. We are people of one heart. We are people of one soul. We are people of one spirit.

This world has a chance, if we overcome our fear, our provincialism, our prejudice.

We are followers of the one God who created all of us in God's image.

Let's grow beyond our tribal mentality.

SERMON SONG

People Got To Be Free (The Rascals)