

**Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost A
Incarnation Lutheran Church**

IS THIS REALLY JESUS TALKING?

HER NAME WAS GAIL. SHE AND HER FAMILY LIVED A FEW BLOCKS AWAY FROM ME AND MY FAMILY WHEN I WAS GROWING UP. AND ALTHOUGH SHE WAS TWO OR MAYBE THREE YEARS YOUNGER THAN I, OUR HOUSES WERE CLOSE ENOUGH FOR US TO PLAY TOGETHER - WALK TO SCHOOL TOGETHER. BUT BY SOCIETAL STANDARDS AT THAT TIME, SHE AND HER FAMILY WERE LABELED "WHITE TRASH." MY PARENTS DID NOT APPROVE OF MY FRIENDSHIP WITH GAIL AND OFTEN REMINDED ME THAT WE JUST DIDN'T ASSOCIATE WITH THOSE KINDS OF PEOPLE. WELL, I GUESS YOU KNOW ME WELL ENOUGH BY NOW TO KNOW THAT MY FAMILY'S OPPOSITION TO OUR FRIENDSHIP ONLY STRENGTHENED IT. GAIL AND I CONTINUED TO BE FRIENDS ALL THROUGHOUT OUR HIGH SCHOOL YEARS. WE PLAYED ON THE GIRLS' BASKETBALL TEAM TOGETHER – SHE TAKING MY FIRST STRING POSITION WHEN I GRADUATED. AND IN MY SENIOR YEAR BOOK, GAIL WROTE, "IF I COULD PICK FOR GOD ONE PERSON TO GO TO HEAVEN IT WOULD BE YOU." I SHOWED THAT TO MY MOTHER. SHE READ IT AND WITH TEARS IN HER EYES SAID, "WE WERE WRONG."

ON THE OTHER HAND, THERE WAS MY COUSIN. HER FAMILY WAS MUCH MORE FINANCIALLY STABLE THAN MINE. HER DAD OWNED HIS OWN BUSINESS AND IN FACT, THAT'S WHERE MY DAD WORKED HIS SECOND JOB. AFTER GETTING UP AT 4:30 EVERY MORNING AND GOING TO THE POST OFFICE WHERE HE WAS A RURAL MAIL CARRIER, HE WENT TO HER DAD'S

PLACE OF BUSINESS FOR THAT SECOND JOB – GETTING HOME ABOUT 6PM IN THE EVENING. AND MY MOM – SHE WORKED AS A CLERK IN A CLOTHING STORE. MY COUSIN WASTED NO TIME THROUGHOUT ALL OUR ELEMENTARY, JUNIOR HIGH AND HIGH SCHOOL DAYS INFORMING THE “IN CROWD” ABOUT MY FAMILY, A FAMILY IN HER EYES, THAT WAS “WHITE TRASH.” I STILL, NOW ALL THESE MANY YEARS LATER, CRINGE WHEN I REMEMBER AS A 3RD GRADER WANTING TO PLAY IN THE BAND BUT NEEDING \$25 TO COVER THE COST OF A RENTAL INSTRUMENT. MY FAMILY DIDN’T HAVE IT – AND MY DAD WENT TO HER DAD TO BORROW THE MONEY. AT SCHOOL THE NEXT DAY, MY COUSIN TOLD EVERYBODY. SHE MADE SURE, UNTIL THE DAY WE GRADUATED FROM HIGH SCHOOL. THAT I – AND EVERYBODY ELSE - KNEW THAT I DID NOT MEASURE UPTHAT I DID NOT BELONG...THAT I BETTER KNOW MY PLACE AND STAY IN IT.

I’M GUESSING ALL OF US CAN SHARE SIMILAR STORIES – STORIES OF WHEN WE’VE DRAWN LINES AND KEPT PEOPLE OUT AND STORIES WHEN OTHERS HAVE DRAWN LINES AND KEPT US OUT. AND WE SURELY HAVE A STORY LIKE THAT BEFORE US TODAY – AND IT’S A TOUGH ONE – BECAUSE IT LOOKS LIKE JESUS IS THE ONE DRAWING THE LINE, LABELING AND TAUNTING, MAKING SURE THAT WOMAN KNOWS SHE DOES NOT BELONG. WHAT DO WE MAKE OF THIS PICTURE OF JESUS? WELL, AT BEST, AS SOMEONE SAID AT OUR NOON COMMUNION SERVICE WEDNESDAY, JESUS OBVOUSLY WAS HAVING A BAD DAY! LET’S LOOK.

JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES, AFTER A CONFRONTATION WITH THE PHARISEES OVER THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN RITUAL PRACTICES AND ACTS OF THE HEART, TRAVEL NOW INTO THE DISTRICT OF TYRE AND SIDON – GENTILE COUNTRY. THEY HARDLY ARRIVE BEFORE A CANAANITE WOMAN APPROACHES THEM AND STARTS YELLING AT JESUS. “HAVE MERCY ON ME, LORD, SON OF DAVID; MY DAUGHTER IS TORMENTED BY A DEMON.” NOW, THIS IS ONE BRAZEN AND BODACIOUS WOMAN BECAUSE NOT ONLY IS SHE A GENTILE (UNCLEAN BY JEWISH LAW) ! SHE IS A CANAANITE – ARCH ENEMIES OF THE HEBREW NATION. AND WHAT’S MORE, SHE’S A WOMAN AND SHE DARES SPEAK TO A JEWISH MAN IN PUBLIC (FORBIDDEN IN THAT DAY). BUT SPEAK SHE DOES! – AND JESUS - JESUS REMAINS SILENT. HE IGNORES HER – AS IF SHE DOESN’T EVEN EXIST. OBVIOUSLY, SHE KEEPS YELLING BECAUSE THE DISCIPLES URGE JESUS TO SEND HER AWAY. EUGENE PETERSON IN *THE MESSAGE* PUTS IT THIS WAY: “THE DISCIPLES CAME AND COMPLAINED, ‘NOW SHE’S BOTHERING US. WOULD YOU PLEASE TAKE CARE OF HER? SHE’S DRIVING US CRAZY.’” AND JESUS, WELL, LOOK AT JESUS’ RESPONSE TO THEM – OBVIOUSLY WITHIN HER HEARING. “I WAS SENT ONLY TO THE LOST SHEEP OF ISRAEL” – MEANING, NEITHER I NOR MY MISSION HAS ANYTHING TO DO WITH ANYONE OTHER THAN THE NATION OF ISRAEL. EVEN HEARING THAT, THE WOMAN NOW COMES, KNEELS AT HIS FEET AND BEGS. “LORD, PLEASE HELP ME.” AND WHAT DOES JESUS DO? HE CALLS HER A DOG. “I CAN’T FEED YOU. MY FOOD IS FOR THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL.” BUT SHE RETORTS, “YES, LORD, YET EVEN THE DOGS EAT THE CRUMBS THAT FALL FROM THEIR

MASTERS' TABLES." JESUS RELENTS. "WOMAN, GREAT IS YOUR FAITH! YOUR DAUGHTER IS HEALED."

NOW, I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU, BUT IT'S HARD FOR ME TO FIND THE JESUS I KNOW IN THIS INTERCHANGE BETWEEN HIM AND THIS CANAANITE WOMAN. AND I'M NOT ALONE. BIBLICAL SCHOLARS DOWN THROUGH THE AGES HAVE STRUGGLED WITH THIS AS WELL. SOME SAY JESUS WAS TESTING THE WOMAN'S FAITH. OTHERS SAY HIS NON-VERBAL CUES TO HER WOULD HAVE SHOWN HER HIS WORDS WERE NOT REALLY SO HARSH. SOME SAY THE EVENT NEVER HAPPENED. AND OTHERS SAY SHE WAS THE ONE DOING THE TESTING. SHE WAS PUSHING JESUS TO SEE BEYOND HIS MISSION TO THE JEWS TO HIS TRUE MISSION - "FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD - THE WHOLE WORLD..."

UNFORTUNATELY, WE DON'T KNOW WHICH, IF ANY OF THESE INTERPRETATIONS ARE ACCURATE, BUT WE DO KNOW SOME THINGS. WE KNOW HE CONVERSED IN PUBLIC WITH A WOMAN THEREBY BREAKING DOWN GENDER BARRIERS. WE KNOW HE CONVERSED WITH A GENTILE, A PEOPLE DEEMED "TRASH" BY JEWISH LAW. WE KNOW HE CONVERSED WITH A CANAANITE - AN ARCH ENEMY OF THE NATION OF ISRAEL. AND WE KNOW HE GRANTED HER PLEA. HER DAUGHTER WAS HEALED. AND SO WE KNOW - SO WE CONFESS - IN THIS ENCOUNTER WITH THIS WOMAN, JESUS STRIKES DOWN ALL RELIGIOUS AND SOCIETAL BARRIERS THAT DIVIDE, Demean, DENY, EXCLUDE, LABEL, DEHUMANIZE ANOTHER - AND HE OPENS THE DOORS TO THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN TO ALL - ALL - AND ALL MEANS ALL.

YOU KNOW, I'M CONVINCED, PARTICULARLY ON SUNDAYS LIKE THIS, THAT GOD HAS A REAL SENSE OF HUMOR – THAT GOD LIKES TO PUT SCRIPTURE RIGHT IN FRONT OF OUR FACE THAT CHALLENGES EVERYTHING GOING ON IN OUR WORLD RIGHT NOW – AND THAT GOD THEN ENJOYS SITTING BACK AND WATCHING WHAT WE DO WITH WHAT THAT SCRIPTURE TEACHES. WHY ELSE WOULD WE HAVE A PASSAGE LIKE THIS TODAY IN THE AFTERMATH OF CHARLOTTESVILLE? WHY ELSE WOULD WE BE REMINDED OF THIS STORY OF OUR LORD JESUS WHO REMOVED ALL BARRIERS OF CREED, NATIONALITY, RACE, GENDER, OR ANYTHING ELSE AND OPENED THE DOORS OF THE KINGDOM – NOT JUST SOMEDAY IN THE FUTURE IN THE SKY BY AND BY – BUT NOW – TODAY – TODAY WHEN ISSUES OF CREED, NATIONALITY, RACE, GENDER , SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND EVERYTHING ELSE ARE DIVIDING ...WHEN HATE IS RAGING...WHEN EVIL IS LIFTING IT'S EVIL HEAD – WHY ELSE WOULD GOD PUT THIS TEXT BEFORE US THIS DAY?

I'LL SPEAK FOR MYSELF AND LEAVE YOU TO STRUGGLE WITH AND PRAY ABOUT YOUR OWN ANSWERS – BUT FOR ME, THIS TEXT SERVES AS A REMINDER THAT I AM TO BE SHAPED BY THE GOSPEL AND NOTHING ELSE – THAT NOT MY GENDER, MY SKIN COLOR, MY CULTURE, MY HERITAGE, MY POLITICAL LEANINGS – NOTHING – NOTHING SAVE THE GOSPEL OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST SHOULD SHAPE WHO I AM – WHAT I BELIEVE – HOW I BEHAVE. THAT'S WHAT I LEARNED THIS WEEK AS I WRESTLED WITH THIS STORY OF JESUS AND THE CANAANITE WOMAN. AND SO, A STORY.

EVERY MONDAY, KRIS ENLARGES MY SERMON SCRIPT FROM THE DAY BEFORE AND I TAKE IT TO MR. EARL ON MY WAY HOME. HE HAS ALL MY SERMONS NUMBERED, NEATLY PLACED IN ORDER, AND UNDERLINED. I CHERISH THESE MONDAY AFTERNOON CONVERSATIONS. LAST MONDAY WAS PARTICULARLY PROFOUND. "YOU KNOW," PASTOR JANE," HE SAID. "I'M HURTING FOR THE YOUNG PEOPLE OF TODAY. THEIR WORLD IS SO BROKEN, SO FULL OF HATE, SO FULL OF JUDGING, SO FULL OF ACTS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST PEOPLE JUST BECAUSE OF THINGS LIKE THEIR SKIN COLOR, OR THEIR RELIGION, OR THEIR SEXUAL ORIENTATION." HE WENT ON TO SAY, "I LIKE THIS NEW POPE, POPE FRANCIS. HE KNOWS JESUS. IT SHOWS IN THE WAY HE TREATS PEOPLE, PARTICULARLY, THOSE LABELED OUTCASTS BY SOCIETY." "WHY," HE SAID,"WHY CANT WE ALL JUST LEARN TO LIVE LIKE JESUS?"

WHY NOT, MR. EARL? WHY NOT? MAY GOD HELP US SO TO DO. AMEN.