

“THE BLIND LEADING THE BLIND”

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Matthew 15:10-28

Unless you’ve been living under a rock, you know what’s going to be happening tomorrow, right? A total eclipse of the sun. Oh, there’s so much excitement about it! It’s splashed all over the television, newspapers and social media.

There are at least two families in the church of which I’m aware – who have traveled south to see the eclipse in some of the most ideal viewing places possible. Now, that’s some real enthusiasm about it – traveling to take it all in!

Well, like I said, the news have been filled with information about what’s to happen tomorrow. We know **when** it’s happening, we know **what’s** happening, we know **how long** it’s been since it happened previously, and we know **how long** it will be until it happens again.

And, probably, most importantly, we know, because we’ve been told over and over and over again, that we’re not to look directly at it - unless we’re prepared to have our eyesight permanently impaired. There are ways to view it, but you have to prepare ahead of time. You can’t just look up at the covered-over sun. You have to take care of your eyes! They’re the only ones you have!

Well, friends, I want to suggest to you that today’s Gospel lesson does much the same thing as the media has been doing in terms of our eyesight, only for a different sense – not sight, but hearing. Let me explain as I remind you of what the lesson said.

In the beginning of the lesson, Jesus is having a conversation with his disciples, and they tell him (not for the first time and certainly not the last) that the Pharisees have taken offense at something he has said. Jesus replies to them a sentence that since that time has become common parlance in our language as well – “the blind leading the blind.” He said, “Let them alone” (in other words) – don’t lose sleep over them. “They are the blind leading the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.”

I think what Jesus was trying to tell the disciples was “hey, fellas, you know the truth, you hear the truth, if the Pharisees don’t want to hear it and want to

spread lies, so be it. It will be to their peril. You continue listening to the truth and living it.”

And then, right after that, in the next section of the lesson, something interesting happens – really interesting, and, I have to say, a bit disconcerting. It’s a conversation between Jesus and a Canaanite woman. I’d be curious to know how many of you ever heard a sermon preached on this text, because so far as I know, most preachers avoid it. Why? Well, there’s a moment in the conversation where Jesus says something that doesn’t appear to be very nice, and rather than try to deal with it or explain it, most preachers skip over it.

Well, let’s be brave and take a look at it.

A Canaanite woman comes up to Jesus and shouts that her daughter is possessed by a demon and she needs his help. What does Jesus do? Nothing. Doesn’t answer her at all.

His disciples appear, however, to be really irritated with her and urge him to send her away, because she keeps shouting. What’s Jesus’ response? He says something about sent only to the lost sheep of Israel, of which that woman is not a part. And rather than being crestfallen, and walking away from Jesus, instead the Canaanite woman approaches him, kneels down before him and pleads with him for her daughter’s healing – and this is where it gets awkward, he says this: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

Now, friends, Jesus’ words can probably be explained away as some sort of metaphor for non-Jews, but however you can explain it, for that woman to hear it from the very one she trusted to heal her daughter had to hurt. Who would have blamed her from getting up on her feet and going away in tears.

Yet, so deep was her love and concern for her daughter that she stayed rooted in that spot, and pled with him once again, and when she did, Jesus’ heart opened up to her and he said, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

Now, let me go back to what I said a few moments ago – that I think this lesson is a call to care for our ears, how and what we hear – because I think that’s exactly what happened with Jesus in the passage. Despite being urged by his disciples for him to turn away from the woman, despite the fact that she wasn’t a Jew, despite the fact that she was taking up his time, Jesus **finally** listened to her, really listened to her. He listened to her heart, he listened and heard the love of a mother for a deeply troubled child, a love so deep that she wouldn’t take “no” for an answer, a love so deep that she let what could have been an insult go by, a love so deep she wouldn’t give up. Jesus listened to her, he heard her, he saw her heart,

and his heart opened up to heal her daughter of the demons with which she had struggled for so long.

Before I go on, I need to mention something to you. Over the course of the year, most of you know I do sermon series, on themes I select. But this summer, I've been preaching from the lectionary, which is a given set of scriptures for each Sunday of the year. I haven't preached the lectionary in a long time, but this year I decided to do so, for whatever reason, and I think it no accident that this text came up at a time that we needed to hear it the most.

Because, as all of you know so well, we're living in turbulent times, and this week perhaps even more than ever. Last Saturday in Charlottesville, Virginia, white supremacists came to speak evil, and others came to speak against them, and the situation blew up, and in the end, three people died, many others were injured, and our country is wounded.

It's been a bad week, a really bad week, with lots and lots of bad things being said, lots and lots of people being hurt, lots and lots of anger, and lots and lots of tears. So I think we would be wise to take a lesson from Jesus – and do some listening.

First, listen to the Word. Listen to God's Word. God's Word that tells us that God created everyone in his image – everyone. God's Word that tells us that racism is wrong. Period. Wrong. Call it for what it is – sin. We need to listen to God's Word and as disciples of Christ, not be afraid to say it. The world needs to hear us say it. Those who are being wounded by racism, need to hear us say it. They need to know that we care.

Perhaps you've heard the saying that Martin Niemoller, a pastor who stood up against the Nazis, wrote:

“First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out –
because I was not a Socialist.
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out –
because I was not a Trade Unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out –
because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak for me.”

Oh friends, may we listen to God's Word and speak out against racism.

Secondly, may we listen to the ones who are being hurt by the hateful language and acts. Jesus took the time to listen to that woman and hear her pain, and it changed everything for him, and for her. He got to know her as a person, he

heard her love for her daughter, her anguish for her daughter's pain – and it changed him.

I think we need to do that as well. We need to find opportunities to talk to those who are being hurt by racism and hear their stories. We started that a few years ago in our dialogues with people from Providence and Wrights' churches, and it wasn't easy, but it mattered. They knew that we cared. We need to do more of that.

I want to share a deeply personal story with you about something that was very painful for me. A number of years ago, our Annual Conference was struggling with money problems – big money problems. Well, a few of us, five of us pastors from the Elkton area, put our heads together and came up with what we thought was a good idea – to slash the conference budget across the board – x percent. No one group would have to suffer any more than another.

And so, at the Annual Conference session, we stood up and made the proposal, and before we knew it, there was a firestorm. It was soundly defeated, and we thought that was that, but then the five of us were called in to a meeting with the Bishop and leaders of African American churches from around the conference, who had taken it as an act of racism. They felt like we were trying to cut programs that would benefit them. Nothing could have been further from the truth, but that's what they thought.

So the bishop called us together, and we sat in a circle in a room and they told us how they felt. They were hurt, and they let us know it in no uncertain terms, and even though we explained ourselves, we couldn't make it right.

As painful as that experience was, I learned a whole lot that night by listening to their voices. I learned how years of being excluded, years of being ignored, years of having their budgets slashed when others were having theirs raised, affected the way they saw what we had done. And most of all, I learned that, because we hadn't talked to anyone in authority about our idea before we presented it, it seemed like a slap in the face and total disrespect to the Conference Council Director, who was African American.

If I had to do it all over again, I would do it differently. Not because our idea was bad, but because people were hurt who didn't have to be, if we had only known. And we might have known, had we talked to them. It was a valuable lesson that has stayed with me.

I remember how powerful it was to hear the stories in our dialogues with our friends from Providence and Wrights. To hear about how they have had to get used to being watched in stores because people are suspicious of them, or how they have

to have what they call “the conversation” – telling their children what to do and how to react if they are stopped in their cars by a police officer, which they are many more times likely to be than their white counterparts.

Well, I could go on, but I want to mention one more thing that we should listen to, especially in times like these, and that is our faith. Remember who you are. Remember that you are a child of God, and a disciple of Christ, and let that remembering affect the way you speak and act. It’s so easy in these volatile times to jump on the bandwagon and react impulsively, without thinking. It’s so easy to share something on Facebook or tweet something in anger.

Remember who you are! You are a child of God, a disciple of Christ, called to love, not hate; unity, not division. I read a moving little story this week of a girl whose mother had died, and she was so angry about it that she began to write angry, ugly letters. She was so tired of everybody giving her platitudes about how her mother was in a better place, and how God had a reason for her dying, and so on, that she wrote these letters.

After her mother died, she lived with her grandmother, and so her grandmother received many of the letters. One day, when the girl came into the kitchen her grandmother was standing at the sink, and without turning around, she said to her, “This hurt me. These words you have written have hurt my feelings.” And then she turned and faced her and said, “And so I want to know, Elsa, is this the kind of person you want to be? Do you want to be the kind of person who uses your words to hurt people?” (Elsa Cook, “Character,” *The Christian Century*, 8/16/17, p. 25)

Those words touched that little girl’s heart and never left her, and years later she wrote about them in a journal that I read. Friends, listen to your faith, so that you will be known as a child of God, a disciple of Christ, a bearer of life, someone who cares.

So I want to close today with some words from the President of the Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church, Bruce Ough. He writes: “I pray that the shock, dismay and grief of Charlottesville will be a turning point for the US and even our global United Methodist Church. We share collective responsibility to turn our thin words into thick action. We share collective responsibility to break our silence. We share collective responsibility to restore health to the communities and relationship out of which extremism, hatred and racism grow. We share collective responsibility, as followers of the Prince of Peace, to create non-violent communities where people with different political and religious views respect each other. We share responsibility to articulate the vision of the Beloved Community where no person feels endangered on account of their social, racial or cultural identity.”

He finishes: “This is the moment for the United Methodist Church and all peoples of faith to be bold in our witness against racism and white supremacy. The vision of the Beloved Community lies not behind us, but before us. I urge us to pray for the Holy Spirit to break through and work through the United Methodist Church to heal our broken world and make tangible, visible the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.” (UMC.org)

Friends, may we be a part of making that happen.

May it be so.

Amen.