

IN GOD'S WORLD

Like all of you, I was greatly disturbed by the events that took place in Charlottesville, Virginia, last weekend; and if that wasn't bad enough, the same kind of destructive hate reared its ugly head in Boston yesterday. By the way, let me say at the offset that the terrorist attacks in Spain that happened a few days ago are also totally reprehensible, but this morning I want to speak to the appalling events that are closer to home and affect us more directly.

The sickening images of violence, hatred and bigotry that have been in the news this past week are now seared in my brain, and it's going to take a very long time for them to go away. But as much as I would like to quickly erase those events from my mind because of how disturbing it is and how upset and angry it makes me, I know in my heart that I shouldn't forget too quickly. I shouldn't consign the hatred that was on display in Virginia eight days ago and in Boston yesterday to the dustbin of history before seriously reflecting on the threat it poses to my most cherished beliefs as an American and a Christian.

As a citizen of the United States who strongly believes in "liberty and justice for all" and agrees with our Declaration of Independence that all men and women are created equal, I don't want to remain silent or close my eyes to the things that have been and are going on in our nation these days because doing that, in a sense, legitimizes it and communicates that it's okay, it's no big deal.

And as a minister of Jesus Christ, I feel I have a responsibility to be address those ugly events in some way and not ignore them, because incidents like those that happened in Charlottesville and Boston, which, unfortunately, will almost certainly continue to happen, are a blight on the faith I embrace and cherish, and are unmistakably and indisputably unchristian. The warped mindset, the ignorant and dangerous claim that one isn't fully human and doesn't belong here unless they're Aryan, non-Jewish, white Europeans, is totally contrary to the religion I embrace and is a slap in the face to Christ, my Lord and Savior.

In this morning's Gospel reading, Jesus traveled to foreign territory. As Matthew records, "Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon." This was an area teeming with Gentiles, aka non-Jews, people who weren't like Jesus, who had a different history, who didn't worship the way Jesus did and didn't eat

the way he did.

Now, please note the word “withdrew.” “Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.” It indicates that Jesus likely wanted to be left alone so he could get to wherever he was going and turn in for the night. But if that’s what he wanted, he was sorely disappointed because he was interrupted.

A woman called out to him. A bothersome woman who was a Canaanite. The disciples were almost certainly wary of her. A Canaanite? One of those people? Uh-uh, we don’t associate with them. They’re baaad. Canaanites have always been bad. They’re unclean. They don’t worship our God and follow our customs. So let’s not get involved with this hysterical woman. Hopefully if we ignore her she’ll get the message that she’s not welcome and just go away.

But she didn’t go away. She continued to follow Jesus down the street, all the while wailing desperately the way someone who was grieving a loved one’s death would do. “Please have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David! Help me! My daughter isn’t well! She’s being tormented by a demon!”

Jesus didn’t say anything in response. He simply kept walking silently, head down, powering on past her and trying to ignore her curt interruption. But this woman was extremely persistent. You had to give her credit for that. Of course, she also had a lot riding on this encounter with Jesus: the health and wellbeing of her precious daughter.

So there she was, refusing to leave Jesus alone, shadowing him and his disciples, crying out to them and causing a ruckus. I can imagine one of the twelve screaming at her, or at least wanting to scream, “Will you get lost, lady? Just leave us alone! It’s been a long day and Jesus is exhausted, so stop bothering him and go away!” Finally, after who knows how much time listening to this badgering and bothersome woman’s screams, Jesus stopped and turned to look at her.

Now, this is the part of the story where we expect our Lord, of all people, to feel a flood of compassion for this woman. This is where things are supposed to play out the way so many other miracle stories in the Gospels do. We’ve read about those kinds of healing events many times before: someone in distress cries out to Jesus; the disciples scoff; Jesus rebukes the disciples and makes the person well; the healed person is ecstatic, and we all learn a valuable lesson. But that’s not what happened in this particular Gospel story. Actually, in this story, Jesus comes off cold and unfeeling.

“Ma’am,” he said, “I’m here to feed the children of Israel, not you Canaanites. After all, it’s not fair to take the children’s bread and feed it to the dogs, is it?”

At first glance, this response of Jesus to the Canaanite woman seems to give ammunition to the White Nationalists, KKK, neo-Nazis and other fomenters of hatred we saw in Charlottesville and Boston. “You see,” they could argue, Jesus himself distinguished between his ethnicity and the Canaanite woman’s ethnicity, and he called her a dog.”

Which is pretty much how the hate groups we saw on the news last week and yesterday think of African Americans and Jews and others who don’t come from the same White European stock as they do. They’re just “dogs.” They’re less than human, and they don’t belong here. But unlike those groups, Jesus wasn’t a hater. So, what was going on with him?

Christians have been debating that question for centuries, mostly in an attempt to try to cut Jesus some slack and buffer his seemingly callous behavior. Perhaps he was having a bad day and was just grumpy. He might have picked up a pebble in his sandal on his travels and was irritated by it and snapped at the Canaanite woman. Perhaps the human side of Jesus came out a bit more strongly than we’re used to seeing. Or it could be that he was just testing her faith.

We could tie ourselves in theological knots trying to decipher the answer as to why Jesus acted the way he did toward that poor Canaanite woman. But maybe we need to set the “why” question aside, at least for now, because I think the reason for Jesus’ seemingly rude behavior, for why he initially rejected the pleas of the Canaanite woman, is less important than the action that followed.

“I shouldn’t throw the children’s food to the dogs,” Jesus said.

“Yes, Lord,” the woman replied. “But even the dogs get to eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.” In other words, “Even Canaanites are entitled to some of your table scraps, don’t you think?”

Imagine the looks on the disciples’ faces when they heard that reply. Their mouths must have dropped open and their eyes bugged out. “What did she just say to him? Did she—a dirty rotten Canaanite and a lowly woman, as well—did she just talk back to our Lord?”

Yes, she did. And it was a very bold and courageous thing for her to do, an action that rattled everyone’s assumptions—probably even Jesus’ assumptions.

Now, we can’t read Jesus’ mind in this story. And we’ll never know for sure why he acted the way he did. But what we do know is that, ultimately, Jesus was moved by what the Canaanite woman said to him, and at that moment he saw her humanity, as clear as a bell. And he recognized her as a beloved child of God who was as precious to God as the Jews and, therefore,

just as worthy as a Jew to receive nourishment from God's table.

Maybe Jesus was moved by the Canaanite woman's passion, or her dogged persistence, or her faith. Or maybe it was a combination of all three of those things that touched Jesus and opened his heart to her pleas. But whatever she said or did to change Jesus' mind, it worked. Jesus granted the woman the mercy she begged for, healed her daughter (who was also a Canaanite, by the way), and restored her family.

It's a vital part of our Christian journey, our calling through our baptism, to hear the people crying out to us in their pain and their grief and their struggles for justice and equality, and respond to them in love. As followers of Christ, we're called to be attentive to others' needs, meet them where they are, and interact with them on an equal level, even when they seem as different and foreign to us, at least on the outside, as that Canaanite woman first seemed to Jesus.

So, I'm grateful for the Canaanite woman, that unnamed saint in Matthew's Gospel, because through her story we catch a glimpse of the world as God intends it to be.

And how does God intend the world to be?

In God's world, differences between people of other races, religions and identities will dissolve, and no one will be discriminated against or made to feel less than human.

In God's world, angry, hate-filled demonstrations like we saw in Charlottesville and Boston will be a thing of the past, because we will look at one another through God's eyes and know that we're all God's children, equally precious and equal to one another.

In God's world, haters will learn from Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman, have their hearts transformed, and show acceptance and compassion toward all people.

In God's world, it will be engrained in us, whether we want it to be or not, that divine mercy and healing know no bounds and are for rich and poor, white people and people of color, Jews, Muslims and Christians, those who are known to us and those who are strangers and foreigners.

And in God's world, there will never be another tragedy like the one that happened in Charlottesville last week; or another hate-filled gathering like the one that took place yesterday in Boston. Because in God's world love is stronger than hate and will always overcome it.

May the coming of God's world of love, justice, peace and equality be near. Amen.