

TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Genesis 45:1-15, Psalm 133; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:10-28

Try as we may, we do not always find ourselves comfortable when we are among people we don't know. Visiting a new church can be nerve wracking, unless we are among the extroverts. Even within our own country we find cultural and ethnic differences that may challenge the best of us. Traveling outside of Canada may similarly pose challenges.

It is easy for us to be caring at a distance. Writing cheques to help people in need is an important and good service that is made easier because we don't have to rub shoulders with the people we are helping. If we volunteer in the community, or help feed the needy, we may wonder what on earth we would say to such people if we had to be in their homes, or on the street.

In the Gospel today, Jesus has a discussion about the way we think. He points out that what we say, perhaps how we act toward others, is a better indication of how we think, than keeping certain religious rules about what we eat or drink. It seems his comments offended those who thought they were deeply religious.

Remember the story Jesus told of the pious person who went into the temple to pray. He stood there in the attitude of prayer and said, "Thank God I am not like other people." It would be very offensive if we said, "Thank God I am not of another race or culture." Yet we do find ourselves thinking such things as we watch the news, or engage in heated conversations about those people who don't agree with our politics or religion or social

attitudes. It makes it worse when we are sure we are right and they are wrong. Being bigoted against bigots is no virtue!

The Gospel today tells a story about Jesus leaving his homeland and going into what we would now call Lebanon. There was a long-standing ethnic feud between the people of the Holy Land and the people of Lebanon. There still is, so this might well be a modern day story.

Jesus is approached by a local woman who wants him to heal her daughter. The Israelites called such people “dogs” who didn’t enjoy the privileged place in society then as they do for many of us now. It was obvious that the woman was desperate.

She would have been brought up to despise Jews. She risked being ignored and insulted. There are moments of desperation in our lives when we are compelled to step out of our safety zone, especially when our need overcomes fear and prejudice.

Jesus tests the woman by using the common racial slur, “We don’t give dogs human food.” Jesus is not merely saying that dogs shouldn’t beg at a table, He is using a dreadful slur to test the faith of the woman. We may find that shocking. Please note Jesus is not being a racist, He is testing the boundaries that have been set to see if they be crossed? The woman is desperate, but is she able, to step through pride and prejudice and reach the point of acceptance and healing? Yes, Jesus comes to us, but we also must make that step of faith toward him.

In the Book of Common Prayer, there is a lovely prayer called the Prayer of Humble Approach that begins with the words “We do not presume to come to this thy table, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercy.” The prayer is built around the Gospel reading we have heard today. Jesus is different. He isn’t a nice friendly Newfoundlander, or a person we would meet at church. We have to admit our need as we

approach him. “Our own righteousness” is insufficient. By “righteousness,” we can mean pride, or confidence in our own culture, or learning, or intellect, or good taste, or manners. We might mean our own racial, or political, or national roots. Jesus is for everyone and because he is, he does not belong exclusively to anyone.

The woman replies with some good humor. She points out that even dogs get the scraps that fall from a table. Jesus tells her that her trust has made it possible for her daughter to be healed.

The woman is being a channel for the healing of another. This is a reminder here that we may become “go-betweens” for others, and be the means by which God’s gift of healing love may be extended to them.

All too often are prayers are offered at a distance. They are safe and cost us little. They trip off the tongue at bedtime, or even in church, when that long list of sick people is read during the Prayers of the People. We risk nothing when we say, “God bless so and so.”

When Jesus says that if we are to follow him we must be cross-bearers, he invites us into uncomfortable, painful, and hurting places where those who need our prayers live. He invites us out of our comfort zones. He invites us to experience the tragedy and hurt someone else is suffering. He invites us to be with those who may be called “dogs,” or think of themselves as “dogs”, unclean, apart, perhaps at the bottom of the social or class ladder, or perhaps “apart” because of their lifestyle or habits.

The woman from the region of Tyre and Sidon came to Jesus where he was. He came to her. They met and exchanged unpleasant words, and someone else was healed. Here is an extraordinary example of reconciliation and grace.

It is clear that few of us has the strength to reach out beyond our comfort zones. Yet, wehe we participate in the Eucharist, we step from our own world into the unknown place where Jesus is, and he feeds us with more than crumbs or scraps. We receive him. We live in him and he lives in us. The question is, for who is our encounter with the Lord intended? Is it intended for another person who may live in a different place, or have an experience outside the normal routine of our life, or whose habits or lifestyle may offend us greatly?

Perhaps in this holy place today we can think of a group, or a person, who cries out to be healed in one way or another. Dare we step out to the table at which the Lord sits, and beg for his aid? Dare we be a channel of healing and love to that other person, or group who also belongs to God and for whom Jesus died? The choice is our own.

AMEN.