11th Sunday after Pentecost

Isaiah 56:1-8 Matthew 15:10-28

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church 8-16-20

You may have noticed that both the text from Isaiah and the text from Matthew appointed for this morning have to do with the **radical reach** of God's mercy and love, along with a reminder to the faith communities addressed in each text that their lives were to bear witness **to** and be reflective **of** that same radical reach of inclusion…

That reminder in Third Isaiah being addressed to the People of Israel after their return home from exile in the 6th century BCE, when, upon returning to Jerusalem and its environs they found strangers living in their homes, a myriad of cultures and religions in the public square, and the economy in shambles… All of that chaos leading to the temptation to get things under control, to batten down the hatches, to close ranks, to prescribe a narrow set of requirements for entrance into the community of faith; **requirements of "belonging"** measured in this case by one's ethnic background and the adherence to certain dietary laws, cleanliness codes, and sexual mores, among others things…

Our text from Isaiah this morning lifting up the prophet's call to the People of Israel to **put away such restrictions**, and instead to welcome the foreigner, the "other"… even the "eunuchs" (who were castrated males, deemed by Levitical law to be way outside the parameters that defined the community of faith)…

Isaiah declaring that anyone who expressed a desire to "hitch their star" to the God of Israel… **the God whose heart for love was equal only to God's passion for justice**… Isaiah declaring that anyone who **desired** to live a "way of life" modeled after this God, made them "children of God" and "covenantal partners" with the People of Israel, no other conditions attached.

So too Matthew, addressing his early Christian community in the last decades of the first century, critiqued a similar temptation in the community to **define the parameters of "belonging" in narrow and restrictive ways…** Matthew's community being made up of both Jews and Gentiles, caught in the very real struggle to figure out which identity markers central to Judaism should be central to those who wanted to model their lives in the "way of Jesus"… Jesus himself being a Jew of course, his heart and life wholly reflective of the creating, liberating, radically "outreaching" God revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures…

Matthew then, as reflected in the first part of our Gospel text for this morning, using a teaching moment Jesus had had with his disciples over the question of what constitutes "belonging" in the community of faith… Jesus lambasting the age-old tendency to use

"external" measures as a litmus test; in this case the "external" measure of "clean hands" and "kosher food" as prescribed in Levitical law and reinforced again and again by tradition…

Jesus insisting instead that the life of faith is not about "the cleanliness of hands or the "kosherness" of food," but about "the cleansing of hearts" and the giving over of those hearts to the **God whose heart for love was equaled only to God's passion for justice…**

Matthew challenging **in his community** that **same tendency** Isaiah was challenging **in his** community to limit inclusion in the embrace of God's reach to those who "qualified" by some set of external markers, **all the while paying little or no attention** to the intentions of people's hearts on behalf of love, mercy, justice, and liberation; all of which are hallmarks of the God made known in the Hebrew Scriptures and made incarnate in the person of Jesus…

Both Isaiah and Matthew then, critiquing tendencies that have been part of religious communities from time in memorial.

(As it was in the Swedish Lutheran Church of my childhood, as evidenced by the elderly woman who, in her eagerness to make sure the community remained predominantly Swedish, fought tooth and nail to keep the Swedish hymnals in the pews, saying to the pastor through her tears, "But Pastor, if we don't pray in Swedish, how will God understand us?")

We laugh perhaps, but this tendency toward exclusion manifests itself in Christian congregations everywhere, often times in ways the "insiders" can't even see… Which is why it's helpful to read texts like those appointed for this morning and to consider ways in which our reach outward into the world may be less fulsome or open than we might imagine… A consideration that could very well be the **heart** of this morning's texts, the **"take-home"** we're called to ponder, the **climax** of the musical line in regards to Christian hospitality…

But, centering ourselves for just a moment on our Gospel lesson from Matthew, I would like to suggest there is something else this text is challenging us to see in regards to Christian hospitality, as highlighted in the **second part** of this morning's Gospel text, which tells the story of the Canaanite woman who came to Jesus begging for mercy on behalf of her demon-possessed daughter and the verbal wrestling match that ensued between the two until, in the end, Jesus granted the woman her request…

That **second part** of our Gospel lesson intending, I think, to do to its listeners what the poet David Craig intends to do to his listeners in his poem entitled "Pentecost," which goes like this…

Pentecost

What is this Holy Spirit?

And what it is doing in the eggplant?

"What?" you may ask… "What nonsense is this poet asking us to consider?"

Truly, this Pentecost poem couldn't raise more Christian eyebrows than the story of the Canaanite woman must have raised in Matthew's community… In part because in Jesus' day, in the Jewish community, the Canaanite woman couldn't have symbolized a more despicable example of an "outsider", and Matthew's community, some fifty years on would have known this…

She was a Canaanite for one thing, descended from a group of Gentiles whose history with Israel was fraught with animosity. And she was a woman… Seemingly a woman on her own, without a man to give her validity or credibility… And a loud woman at that… insistent… quarrelsome… demanding… Her presence in the story making the skin on any "good first-century Christian" crawl…

And then added to that, the story also includes Jesus' shocking reaction to the Canaanite woman's request as he initially ignored her, then told her he didn't come to minister to the likes of her, then called her a dog, a slur commonly used by Jews for Gentiles in that day… those "dogs" deemed unworthy to partake of the bread reserved for the People of Israel…

All of it leading us to ask in the style of the eggplant poem, **"Who is this God of mercy and inclusion made known in the Hebrew Scriptures and made incarnate in the person of Jesus? And what is this God doing in this story?"**

Questions for which I can only find some glimpses of answers in an experience I had one day while visiting an elderly homebound woman who suffered from physical, mental and emotional problems…

So when I was serving as the pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church, I used to visit a member of the congregation named Margaret who lived in a boarding house in the willy-wags of Bucksport run by a woman named Pearl and her husband Mike, both of whom have long bleach-blonde hair with dark roots… Besides having an assortment of elderly people in their boarding home, Pearl and Mike also shelter stray animals, which means at any given time they might have twenty dogs and at least that many cats, not to mention a brood of rag-a-muffin grandchildren running hither and yon… not to mention three junk cars, two broken washing machines and an old sofa in their muddy house yard… A picture of disarray on the outside of the house perfectly mirrored on the inside…

Anyway, one day I went to visit my parishioner Margaret for the purpose of dedicating a tree in memory of her recently-deceased father (a tree which Mike and Pearl had planted in the side yard the day before). I went also, as I did regularly, to share communion with her…

When I arrived and Pearl got Margaret settled in a chair by the tree, it suddenly became clear that Pearl and all of her ragamuffin grandchildren (ages two to ten) were planning on being part of the ceremony. Which was fine, as **there we all were** on a beautiful sun-lit autumn day gathered around a small maple tree and giving thanks for Margaret's father…

But then it came time for communion. And so I got out the two little wafers I had brought, along with the two small glasses of grape juice, and I laid them out on the wobbly plastic table next to Margaret, and I said to Pearl and her grandchildren, "And now Margaret and I are going to share the Eucharist." And they all just stood there and stared at me…

It was clear they didn't know what I was talking about… The Eucharist?

"It's a meal," I said… "A meal of bread and wine that carries the risen Jesus so we can take him into our lives… I bring this meal to Margaret every month because it's part of our Christian tradition and because it's very important to Margaret, just as I've come to bring it to her today… And now **she and I** are going to share this meal together…"

Still none of them moved. I knew none of them had had much if any experience in the church. I doubted any of them had been baptized. And there I was, the keeper of the church's practices, ordained into a vocation that required I honor those practices in ways that were "meet, right, and salutary."

But what was I to do with that little band of scraggly un-churched people gathered around the table? …So I just continued with the liturgy of confession and prayer and Scripture reading… moving then into the sharing of the peace, shaking each of those little dirt-laden hands… Then came the words of institution and the Lord's Prayer… the most sacred practices of the church.

And still Pearl and her grandchildren just stood there, despite the fact that this meal was not intended for them… Despite the fact that while I wouldn't have thought of them as "dogs," I certainly considered them "unqualified" for the receiving of the holy meal I was about to serve on behalf of Jesus…

But what was I to do?...

So, I took a deep breath, and then I took the two wafers and I broke them into eight little pieces (crumbs really) and went around the circle dipping each peace in the juice, and putting a piece in each little mouth, open like baby birds. And I said to each of those gathered, "This is the body of Christ, broken for you… the blood of Christ shed for you."

And all I can say is that in all my twenty-three years of pastoral ministry, never was there a moment when I more clearly saw the practices of the church fall away, the words fall away, the separation between pastor and congregation fall away, revealing only what shines at the heart of it all… **the longed-for beauty of the One who holds us all…** the One **between whom us and him, us and her,** there is no between… but only a presence that moves through and around us… a love that is as close to us as the air we breathe…

I have no words for what happened that day in the garden next to the maple tree when Pearl and her grandchildren, **by their refusal to leave the table, in the style of the Canaanite woman,** demanded that they receive the body and blood of Jesus, **trusting somehow** that the **blessing inherent in the meal was meant for them just as much as for anyone else in all of God's creation.**

I have no words for what happened that day. But I think whatever it was, it was as sacred and holy an experience as ever there could be, because **there was a moment in that autumn light when between each of us and the "other" there was no between except love…** And with it the realization that while I had been reluctant to open the door to the presence of God for Pearl and her grandchildren, they **yanked open the door to the presence of God for me** and wrestled me into that presence in ways I had never before known…

And what I want to say is that since that day I have begun to see what I think Matthew was trying to get his community to see about Christian hospitality and the radical reach of God's mercy and love when he told the story of the Canaanite woman and her wrestling match with Jesus… I think Matthew was trying to tell them that this "hospitality" isn't about gritting our teeth and acquiescing to open the door in order to let the "other" in, with us Christians in the role of the "gracious host" and the "other" as the "lucky" guest…

I think he was trying to get them to see something much more shocking and "eggplanty" in nature… I think he was trying to get them to remember that in Greek the word for "host" is "xeno," and that "xeno" can also be translated as "guest"… meaning determining just who is the "host" and who is the "guest" in any given moment can be pretty hard to do…

I think he was trying to get them to see that in the story of the Canaanite woman, **she, the outsider, the despised "other" actually played the part of both guest and host** as she "hosted" Jesus and his disciples into this moment when the categories of Jew and Gentile, male and female, clean and unclean, friend and enemy fell away…

The moment when she yanked the door open, **trusting that in the presence of Jesus the presence of God would be just as accessible to her as to anyone else in all of God's creation,** and in so doing gave everyone in the house yard that day a glimpse of what shines at the heart of it all… **the longed-for beauty of the One who holds us all**… the One between whom us and him, us and her, there is no between… but only a presence that moves through and around us… a love that is as close to us as the air we breathe…

The love that brought a kind of healing to them all that day, including the woman's demon-possessed daughter, just as Pearl and her grandchildren brought healing to me that day next to the maple tree…

The kind of healing that opens our eyes to see that in the kingdom of God there is no "other", but only a constellation of love that holds us all, making of us all not "others," but

sisters and brothers…a constellation of love, at the center of which there is a **God whose heart for love is equal only to God's passion for justice…**

And inviting us to see that if we hitch our star to this One … to this love with its radical reach of inclusion, then it will be hard to tell in any yard in Bucksport, Maine, or in any other place or time in all of God's creation just who is the host and who is the guest…

All we will know for sure is that this love invites us to be both… Both host and guest, in thanksgiving for all the Canaanite women and the Pearls in our lives and in the Spirit of the One + whose radical reach of love knows no bounds.