

**August 20, 2017 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

**Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope**

**Isaiah 56:1, 6-8, Psalm 67**

**Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32, Matthew 15:10-28**

(Slate.com culture blog, Browbeat, Leon Neyfakh, 8-17-17; Rev. Oby Ballinger on Kerri Miller, MPR, 8-14-17; Adrienne Maree Brown in 2016? Black Lives Matter; ideas from James Boyce, Working Preacher commentary for this Gospel from 8-14-11; Rev. Jane McBride sermon for 8-20-17 at First Congregational Church of MN, UCC.)

**Grace and peace, courage and persistence, dear people of God, courage and persistence. Amen.**

**She persisted.**

It's her persistence that captures my attention this week.

This Canaanite woman, this mother, crossed the lines of gender and ethnicity, race and religion, social decorum, for goodness sake, to cry out to Jesus, begging for healing for her demon-wrought daughter.

She persisted.

Dogged, honest, desperate, powerful, perhaps terrified, and she persisted.

Somehow I've needed to keep her voice, her persistence, as a counter-point to the news of this last week.

**What a week. What a time.**

The footage and language from an "HBO Vice News Tonight" documentary is seared in my mind's eye.

The torch-lit procession moving through the dark Charlottesville streets.

The hardened faces, angry, ready, low voices intoning,

The chants, some dredged from Nazi-era propaganda, all harsh, all jarring in this age, this time.

I had read articles and heard news about the White Supremacist's rally last Saturday, but journalist Elle Reeve's interviews in that documentary haunt me.

Spanning a 48 hour period, Reeves tries her best to get behind the language, behind the violence.

As a good journalist, she asks questions straight faced, but her eyes seem to grow ever more weary at what she hears and what she witnesses.

In a Slate.com blog *about* that documentary and one particular man who Elle Reeves interviewed multiple times, Leon Neyfakh, says, "It showed us in unforgettable detail how he talks and how he moves—how he lives and breathes violence. It is an argument for not looking away." She persisted.

**People of God, hear me clearly:** White Supremacy like marched in Charlottesville,  
and white supremacy that is in the very air we breathe and the institutions we love,  
it is sinful, it is wrong, it is soul-depleting and life-denying.

Too often the church has looked away, too often people of faith have looked away.

We must not look away.

**That rally, those interviews, the terrifying violent words and actions,**

the counter protests and the death of Heather Heyer and the injuries—physical and spiritual—of so many others, and our nation's response at *every* level...

they have raised to a *new level* the tension surrounding race in our country.

We're quick to avoid tension, schooled a little too well in making it all alright.

There's no denying it now, no backing up. We must not look away.

**Our Gospel this morning is filled with its own tension.**

First, there's this hard to stomach hypocrisy from Jesus.

Did you hear how he condemns the Pharisee's rigid religious practices that fail to care for the person?

But then, in nearly the next breath, when that Canaanite woman cries, he does just what he condemned.

Interestingly, if we'd read this in the Greek we'd notice the alliteration going on.

The Canaanite woman cries, Kyrie Eleison, Lord, have mercy, on the one side of Jesus,

and his irritable disciples echo, Apolyson, Get rid of her, on the other side

Kyrie eleison, Apolyson. Kyrie eleison, Apolyson. Lord, have mercy, Get rid of her.

Oh, the tension, and she persists.

And what do we do when Jesus insists that his mission zone is limited and this desperate woman happens to fall outside his catchment area?

And how do we react when he compares her to a dog, that's a racial slur if ever there was one?

**Over the years, the scholars have found one way or another around this tension:**

*Oh, Jesus is just testing her.*

*Or, let's just gloss over it since it seems so very uncharacteristic of our Savior.*

Honestly, I find this gospel story most compelling, and particularly timely, when we embrace its tension.

Jesus learns something from this woman, he changes, he grows, his vision, truly his mission-zone, widens.

And as much as I wish it hadn't gone down like it did, I hear good news in the way this Canaanite woman persists, and in Jesus' own willingness to be moved by her persistence.

There is a compassion in having a Savior who is human enough to err

and holy enough to do be won-over by love and healing.

For me, that redeems this tension-filled story—it redeems it.

And in that redemption, I pray, we also can grow and change, we also can be moved, we also can confess, we also can speak and hear hard-truth.

**Our congregation's Racial Justice Team has drafted a racial justice statement.**

We hope that over the next months this statement will be fodder for deeper conversation, confession, growth, learning, and surely a share of tension, too.

We anticipate a congregational vote on the statement in February, at the annual meeting.

The draft reads

**"We profess** that all people are beloved of God and are called to be a blessing to one another.

**We reject** as contrary to God's will anything that erodes our shared humanity – including unjust laws, unfair practices, hostile acts, unconscious bias, white supremacy, and fear of people of other ethnicities or cultures.

**We actively seek** to stand together with people of all ethnicities and cultures to promote the joy of fellowship and the dignity of equal opportunity."

With the Racial Justice Team over months I invite you—our whole congregation—into this sacred tension.

**My friend and colleague Oby Ballinger serves as pastor** of Edina Morningside United Church of Christ.

This week he spoke with Kerri Miller on MPR.

Oby said, "As a White pastor serving a mostly White church,

it feels like the calling now is to equip our community to keep facing racism despite White fragility, where White folks are tempted to shut down in the face of racial realities."

He went on, "I continue coming back to this quote from Adrienne Maree Brown last year:

**'Things are not getting worse, they are getting uncovered.**

**We must hold each other tight and continue to pull back the veil.'"**

So true, so true: "Things are not getting worse, they are getting uncovered"

**In that tension,** there is healing, healing for the Canaanite woman's daughter,

healing for those whose skin we call black or brown,

and healing, too, for those whose skin we call white.

It is threatening, let's not kid ourselves: last weekend's violence, the dialogue of this week, make this clear.

But from this tension, healing can come,

And that is why we persist. Kyrie Eleison. Lord, have mercy. Amen.