The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 5, 2021 – Proper 18 – Year B (RCL) Track 1

St. Luke’s Eastport – The Rev. Diana Carroll, Priest-in-Charge

Be Opened

*Show your goodness, O God, to those who are good and to those who are true of heart.*

*In the name of God, the creator of all. Amen.*

There is a strange disconnect in our readings this morning. I wonder if you noticed it. The first two readings, and really the psalm as well, speak clearly about God’s special concern for “the poor.” In Proverbs, God pleads the cause of the poor, advocating for them as though in a court. In the letter of James, God has chosen “the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised.” The emphasis is on God’s compassion for those in need, and on not making distinctions in our treatment of those who are rich and those who are poor, those who have privilege and those who do not.

But then in the gospel, we have this exchange between Jesus and the Gentile woman “of Syrophoenician origin.” Their brief encounter is frankly pretty disturbing. If God has so much compassion and concern for the poor, the outsider, and the oppressed, then why does Jesus at first refuse to help this woman? More than that, he speaks to her in terms that are insulting and derogatory. He calls her and her people—really everyone who does not belong to his own ethnic group—dogs. Even if you are a dog lover, it takes no cultural translation for us to understand how deeply insulting that is.

Some people have argued that Jesus was merely testing the woman, but I don’t think we can explain it away that easily. After all, he does not respond like this to any other person in any of the gospels who comes to him with a request for help. The truth is that Jesus does not come off as the hero in this story, even though he does eventually heal the woman’s daughter. No. The woman herself is the hero. She is the hero, because she recognizes her own value and the value of her daughter, and she stands up for what she knows that she and her family deserve. She challenges Jesus and refuses to be told either that she is not good enough or that there is not enough to go around. Her tenacity, her faith, her insistence on the rightness of her cause are all rewarded, and her daughter is healed.

The writer of the Letter of James says in no uncertain terms that we are not to show partiality based on appearances. I have often bragged about St. Luke’s because I so rarely see that kind of partiality taking place here. When our doors are open, anyone who enters—especially on a Sunday morning—is welcomed and offered hospitality. But offering this kind of acceptance within our own walls is not enough by itself. We also have to resist the partiality, injustice, and discrimination that wreak such havoc in the world outside our walls—as well as within our own hearts.

This is why St. Luke’s has been focusing so intensively on issues of racial and economic justice over the past year. It is why we are reading “The Church Cracked Open” by the Rev. Canon Stephanie Spellers. It is why the vestry will be revisiting our mission and core values as part of our Zoom vestry retreat this month, to consider how we might want to update these guiding documents in light of all that we are learning and wrestling with. We cannot adequately respond to God’s call to love our neighbors without squarely facing and addressing the reality of institutional, systemic racism: within the church as well as outside of it.

I have said before that there are places in each of our lives where we experience oppression, injustice, or discrimination. It may be because of our age or our ability, our ethnicity or the color of our skin, our gender identity or sexuality or level of education, or any number of other reasons. And there are also places where each of us experiences privilege, often without even realizing it.

In those places where we are the afflicted, where we do not have the privilege or hold the power, then like the Syrophoenician woman, I believe we are to stand up for ourselves and claim the kind of acceptance and equity that we know in our hearts we deserve. And in those places where we are privileged, we must be careful not to “rob the poor because they are poor,” not to show partiality to those who share our privilege. Instead, like Jesus, we are to listen to the concerns of others, be willing to have our hearts changed, and help them however we can.

Whatever else the stories in today’s gospel may be about, they are ultimately stories of healing. I believe that healing is possible, including the healing of racism and other forms of discrimination and injustice. But such healing is only possible when we participate with God in bringing it about. When we ourselves hear and believe the healing word of Jesus: “Ephphatha. Be Opened.” Amen.