

11th Sunday after Pentecost, Charlottesville and Auburn

St. Paul reminds all of us Christians, *we were at first outsiders*. We are the branch grafted on to the tree- the wild olive shoot, he says, grafted on to the original trunk. We grew and blossomed from the first call to the Jews. Remember the parable of the workers in the vineyard- some arrive in the early morning, some at noon, some in the late afternoon; and all are paid the same? We are the afternoon arrivals. The Jews were first; and by the grace of God we are given equal grace. Through Christ, we get our late afternoon pay, and become part of the tree.

I say all this because we reversed the situation once we came into power and dominance. We made the Jews the outsiders. We often banished them. The gospel today, beginning with Jesus as a Jew, addresses the conflict and struggle in meeting the outsider. A Canaanite woman, a non-Jew, asks for help. She kneels down and says, "Have mercy on me, Lord, son of David, my daughter is deranged." Jesus and his disciples first dismiss her. They brush her off. "Send her away," say the disciples. "It's not fair to take the children's food," says Jesus "and throw it to the dogs." (Wow, talk about being all too human. It's hard to imagine the exalted Christ being quite so down to earth). The woman persists, with a clever wit. "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table!" Jesus turns, and melts. He is transformed, and engaged. "Great is your faith...let it be done," he says. He opens faith beyond his own ethnicity and tradition.

In first brushing off the woman and dismissing her, Jesus reveals some of the denials and dismissals we all need to just get through the day. But when he hears a cry, a persistent cry, he turns and transforms the pain. He's on his way to the full offering that absorbs and resurrects into new life.

We struggle today with how to nurture our roots **and** reach out with new branches. Events in Charlottesville, VA open the wounds of our great national trauma, the Civil War, that have rippled through many of our communities during the week. In the Civil War we struggled to turn from white supremacy to begin to become an integrated culture. Abraham Lincoln came from a border state, and understood traditions on both sides. Here he is in his 2nd Inaugural Address: "We

pray to the same God,” he said. “We read the same Bible.” And he knew, as our bishop said in his pastoral letter last week (available at the door), white supremacy is a corruption of our fundamental beliefs as Christians. Christ reaches out over ethnic and cultural divides.

Lincoln, 150 years ago, named the situation, “One eighth of the whole population were colored slaves not distributed generally in the Union, but localized in the south. All know that this is somehow the cause of the war. To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest is the object for which the insurgents would **rend** the Union”. Then he goes on in his ringing and uniting words “With malice toward none, and charity for all, *with firmness in the right, as the Lord gives us to see the right*, let us strive to finish the work we are in, to bind the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace....,” “With firmness in the right...” He then adds this telling phrase, “*As the Lord gives us to see the right...*” “*As the Lord gives us to see...*” Through God’s grace we are able to see and respond afresh. Each time and situation we pray to see and respond rightly. In Charlottesville is a genuine question of where the statue of Robert E. Lee, a West Point graduate and Confederate general should be placed- at the center of town, at the edge of town, in a museum? That’s debate-able. But civilized debate isn’t the problem. Underlying the violence is fear- fear that I or my group won’t be dominant anymore; fear that outsiders are taking over my territory and jobs, fear that I won’t have enough. With fear, comes pain. Fear and pain, denied and suppressed, lead to violence.

We are all involved in the denial of pain that leads to violence. We all need to come before the cross, offer our prayers, and learn from God in Christ how to creatively respond. Our conflicts today are now no longer Jewish and Christian, black and white, north and south. Our divisions that move through our lives in Maine are now urban and rural, coastal and inland, rich and poor, employed and unemployed, healthy and disabled, life in hope and life in despair. Moving the statue of a Confederate general became a spark in Charlottesville. We have other sparks in our communities and our families.

Our call, we who gather here, is to become seeds of new life- to become Christ’s body in the places we live and work. In meeting with our wardens, Melanie and Bettyann this week, we marveled at how members of St. Michael’s reach out- in

hospitals and schools, in our extended families, in being a caring person in a competitive business environment, in our legislature and town councils, in REPAIR in helping those emerging from prison. The list could go on. You and I know the ways we are especially called, if we can overcome the denial of suffering that is so common in our culture.

Richard Russo, the Maine writer, writes of a grandmother and granddaughter in a town much like Auburn. “Whenever Ruth (she’s the g-mother) allowed herself to contemplate her grand-daughter’s future, it was always the physical disability she focused on. It reminded her of that story kids read in school- the one where the guy kills an old man because of “vulture eye” then chop him up and hide him under the floor boards. That’s what people want to do with abnormalities, put them somewhere out of sight.... This sweet, slow girl? Hide her away so she won’t get hurt? Hide her well enough so she won’t ask the question we don’t know how to answer: *Who will ever want to love me?*”

Christ transforms our denial of pain into a shared grace. He offers our suffering to the healing powers of God, who not only once created the world, but is still creating and healing through all who follow. As our bishop says- and President Lincoln knew- there’s no quick fix; rather the long, slow journey by people of faith. We renew our participation in the Body of Christ week by week. The Spirit released is the seed, the branch, the power of love that changes the world. Thanks be to God.