

Pentecost 11A + August 20, 2017
Isaiah 56:1, 6-8; Matthew 15:21-18
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit, WI
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A few people have been telling me that I should preach on the solar eclipse. That would be fun, they said. Here in Beloit, by 1:16 p.m. tomorrow 88% of the sun will be hidden. I admit I have been intrigued to read how many communities are looking at the eclipse through the lens of faith. An all-day revival in Oregon along the path of totality is called "Eclipsed with God's Love." Other Christian leaders are interpreting it as a message for our times, and not necessarily a good message. One prominent evangelist said, "While no one can know for sure if judgment is coming on America, it does seem that God is signaling us about something."

But really isn't this just a natural phenomenon that's not all that unusual? According to NASA, a total solar eclipse takes place somewhere on earth about every year and a half. For the one in 2024 you'll only have to drive to Indianapolis to be in the path of totality. The one in 2099 is coming right over Beloit.

So today I decided not about the eclipse but about truth. Just as the sun is being darkened, so goes it with the truth. Has there ever been a time in American history when it was so hard to see through the swirl of events through to the truth?

For those like me who closely follow the news in the hopes that understanding will eventually come, we can feel tossed and turned in all directions until sometimes it's hard to know which way is up. But, people of God, we have got to figure it out. We have got to take a stand. We have been called to serve God in this world. Only when we can point others toward the magnetic

north that is Jesus Christ can we serve as effective ministers of the gospel and ambassadors for Christ.

We are living in a time of division unprecedented since the Civil War. Actually, we are fighting those same demons of white supremacy that were never resolved 150 years ago. Instead they went underground, resurfaced, went underground again and then resurfaced with a vengeance after the church killings in Charleston two years ago.

For the church, there is no question that white supremacy, racism, and neo-Nazism must be condemned. Even the Southern Baptist Convention has made a statement to this effect. But among many who consider themselves Christians, opinions remain sharply divided.

- Should people who oppose white supremacy ignore the movement, hoping it will just run out of steam, or should they be crusading against it?
- Who's responsible for the violence in Charlottesville, the alt-right or the alt-left?
- Is the leadership of our country primarily concerned with the welfare of its people or with cultivating power for personal gain?
- Should all people in America be able to have their say, or are some forms of speech simply unacceptable? Should entire web sites be banned?
- Is censure of this kind good, or does it just make things worse?
- Should Confederate monuments come down or be preserved as legacies of our nation's history?

On the surface, to many people the answers might seem straightforward. But pierce the bubble around any one of these issues and you'll find a complex of dark resentments boiling underneath. Respectable people are arguing opposing points of view. For example, should Confederate monuments come down? Yes, say some scholars, because they idealize attitudes of

oppression and de-humanization. No, say some museum directors, because they are works of art that must be allowed freedom of expression.

There has been talk of responsibility “on many sides” for last weekend’s events in Charlottesville. An opinion piece in yesterday’s New York Times put this into perspective. The author wrote that white supremacists do not represent a “side,” but rather “a worldview in which the United States of America, with its Constitution and laws, and with its hard-won daily understandings of rights and responsibilities, would no longer exist.”

But there are people who will discount even this as a politicized point of view. This is where we come in. What is our role? Has God not made us ministers of the gospel for such as time as this? If so, we must put into action the GPS of the gospel that clearly points to the way, the truth, and the life that is Jesus Christ.

People of faith, it is our obligation to lead the way out of the moral and ethical desert our nations finds itself in the midst of. If we can’t do it, who can? Isaiah sums up the challenge in just few words: “Thus says the Lord: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance will be revealed.”

How do we maintain justice? By holding fast to the anchor that is to the blessed assurance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, in the midst of even in the stormiest of seas. By never, ever, compromising on what we know through the gospel to be right and just. By rooting our lives in Jesus’ command to love one another, and especially our enemies, just as Jesus loves us—fully, freely, radically, unconditionally. And by bringing the good news of God’s forgiveness, mercy, and grace and to all people through our actions, not just our words.

We find a fantastic example of this attitude in the Canaanite woman in today’s Gospel. Although she’s a Gentile, an outsider, her words show she has some knowledge of who Jesus is.

Desperate for her daughter to be healed, she approaches Jesus, shouting repeatedly, “Have mercy on me, Son of David, my daughter is tormented by a demon! Have mercy on me! Have mercy!”

Always the rabbi, Jesus decides to use this as a teaching moment for the disciples. His purpose is to demonstrate to them how healing and salvation are available to all who believe. However, the woman doesn’t know about his motive. All she can see is that Jesus seems to be against her.

At first, he ignores her cries. The disciples assume this means she’s annoying him: “Lord, just send her away!” they beg. Then Jesus addresses her with what sounds like a rebuke: “I was not sent to help Gentiles, only the children of Israel.” That would have stopped most people in their tracks. Instead, she persists, kneeling before him in worship and repeating her cry for help. Jesus then tests her still further: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” He’s not being derogatory but is simply testing her by saying that his teaching is reserved only for Jews—which of course is not the case.

Then comes her stunning response out of a heart of faith: “True, Lord, but even the dogs [meaning house dogs] eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table!” This tells Jesus that she truly believes in him, and is not about to let the fact of her ethnic origin or his apparent rejection get in the way. “O woman,” he says, “great is your faith!” And instantly her daughter is healed.

The message for us is not “What is truth?” because the we already have the gospel to point us toward that. It is rather *persistence in faith*. American writer and theologian Frederick Buechner once said that persistence is key, not because you have to beat a path to God's door before God will open it, but because until you beat the path, there’s no way of even getting to that door.

May God give us the strength for all that lies ahead. AMEN.