
Maintaining Justice

Isaiah 56: 1, 5-8 & Matthew 15: 10-20, 21-28

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on August 20, 2017 by Christy Lohr Sapp

*Christ Jesus, one of the first things we learn as children is to “do the right thing.”
... Lord, show me which rules I need to break in the name of your holy law.
Show me which rules I need to follow in the name of your law-breaking love.
Empower us to tear the whole broken system down and build it again on the
foundation of your love.¹*

This is a portion of a prayer written by former PathWays Chapel Scholar, Jamie McGee and my colleague Adam Hollowell. They have created a fabulous resource called Praying with James Baldwin that they recently published online. (The full devotional is available for download.) This prayer speaks beautifully to today’s scripture readings and to all that is swirling around in our chapel, our city, our country, and our world.

I spent 2 ½ days this past week at an orientation program for faculty who are concerned about teaching for equity. While it was challenging to be out of the office, it also felt like the right place to be as national and local events unfurled. We gathered on Monday morning after the protest-filled weekend in Charlottesville. We reflected on Tuesday after the Confederate soldier monument came down in Durham. We wrapped up on Wednesday as scrutiny was turning to the people of our portico. On Thursday I led the annual day-long retreat for Religious Life staff and arrived on campus to find General Lee’s nose cut off. Today we come into a Chapel visibly changed.

At the closing of the Teaching for Equity training, Duke Dean, Valerie Ashby, spoke to the group about how it is going to be a challenging year on this campus. For those of us who engage students, she reminded that we have the gift of working with these 18-22 year olds before they become set in stone. I sat uncomfortably with that in the moment because I was thinking about our images that are, indeed, set in stone. Some are monuments we have erected in order that they may be enduring.

Another faculty fellow in the program spoke to the group about how we are all walking stories. We have stories, our traditions have stories, and this institution has stories. Some of these stories are shared, some are held closely to our chests, others remain hidden and harder to find. As I reflected on both of these images – stones and stories – I thought of an outing that my daughter and I took last Saturday.

¹ Adam Hollowell and Jamie McGee, Praying with James Baldwin, “Day 14 Last Words: Philando Castile”, <https://prayingwithjamesbaldwin.com/prayers-blog/2017/8/15/day-14-last-words-philando-castile>

Sadie had been angling to make a terrarium, and I've become fascinated by air plants. So, we headed downtown to a local business where they have both. Rather than getting an air plant, however, Sadie gravitated toward an odd-looking succulent. This plant is native to southern Africa. It is a *Lithops* and is commonly referred to as a stone plant, a living stone. This plant is very slow-growing, but for those who have the patience to tend it, stubby, pudgy "leaves" grow out from the center and eventually a bright yellow pointy flower emerges. These living stones produce beauty for those who wait.

Part of our story is that **we** are called to be living stones. Stones can be an inspiration. They can also be an impediment. We are called patiently to tend – and maybe even remove – those stones that cause us to stumble. We stumble on stones that we have erected that make idols of ideals. We stumble on stones that we have chiseled from painful histories. We stumble on stones that we have piled as way-markers to direct our steps in the ways of injustice. How then, do we turn ourselves into life-giving, living stones – stones that are bridging rather than dividing, stones that are foundations for love?

As I was sitting down to rewrite this sermon yesterday in light of the morning's news, my friend and colleague Abdul Waheed, Duke's Muslim Chaplain, called. He asked how I was doing, and I said, "Oh, ok. Just trying to rewrite my sermon." He then asked what the scripture was, and I said "The Canaanite woman whom Jesus refers to as a dog when she asked for her child to be healed." And, Imam Waheed, bless him!, encouraged me to preach this text still saying that the Chapel's statue coming down is symbolic of what this Canaanite woman wanted to happen. He said it plainly and frankly: "This is symbolic of the healing of the demons of racism." For so many in our community, the removal of this statue also represents what Isaiah calls for: maintaining justice and "doing what is right".

We in the Chapel have already received – and will continue to receive – commentary – positive and negative – on the removal of this statue. But in the midst of the negative critique, we also have to remember our call to be living stones and to make love our foundation. In this we can also be made bold by the words of Jesus in today's gospel reading: "Great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

Perhaps we would do well to remember how the Canaanite woman got to the place of having her daughter healed, to remember how the demons were removed, and to recall how her prayers were answered. It was neither painless nor easy.

You know the story: the woman appears out of the blue and approaches Jesus when he is with his disciples, and she begins shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David!" (15: 22) The fact that she is a Canaanite woman is important to this text. She is a foreigner. She is a woman of a different race.

She is wholly and completely “other” from Jesus and his disciples. Some members of the community might have seen her as unclean, and to associate with her represented a transgression of boundaries and the risk of defilement.

Recall, though, that Jesus had just given his disciples a lesson on purity in the verses prior to this in which he proclaimed, “What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.”

The Greek word that is used in this text for “heart” is *kardias*. This is the root from which we derive words like cardiac, but this *kardias* does not refer to the muscle in our bodies that pumps blood. *Kardias* refers more to the inner life or intention. It is one’s character, one’s core, the center of one’s being. It is the foundation of one’s spiritual life. Jesus is saying to his disciples, “What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the soul, and this is what defiles.”

So, back to this woman. She is totally and wholly “other” in relation to Jesus and his disciples. Yet, she is also a noisy nuisance. The disciples who are with Jesus are not impressed, and they try to send her away. They do not want to associate with her. This woman already has two strikes against her: she is a Gentile, a different race, and woman. Third strike: she is loud and demanding. Even today, we don’t like women who are loud and demanding. They say, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” (15:23) These disciples want this woman silenced; they want her removed. This outsider is not welcome, this protestor is shut down. The disciples turn into a crowd committed to her erasure. What comes from their mouths and proceeds from their hearts is exclusion.

Yet this woman will not be deterred. She is determined, and she is desperate. Her child is sick. The health care system has failed her, and simply for the sake of her tormented daughter, she is ready to fight from a place of alienation and ostracism.

The text tells us that she kneels before Jesus as she pleads, “Lord help me”. The word used is *proskuneó* which means “worship”. She prostrates herself on the ground in front of Jesus, submitting fully to fear, despair, and emptiness before him. Yet in this act, she is also acknowledging his lordship. What comes from her mouth and proceeds from her heart are worship and humility.

The director of Duke’s Wellness program told our Religious Life staff on Thursday about work done by a company called Heartmath. This group measures the time between a person’s heartbeats and the severity of the beat – anxious versus calm. The researchers found that when other living creatures are within five feet of each other, their heartbeats tend to align. An anxious heartbeat can engender anxiety around it. A calm heartbeat can quiet another. This is why pet therapy works. We sense other beings through our hearts. It

works among human creatures, too. What proceeds from our hearts – what emanates from our core - influences others.

When people get together, their heart rates can synchronize. Imagine the impact this can have on a crowd. If the loudest voice in the crowd is one of hate and division, other hearts might beat toward hostility. Yet, if the loudest voice in the crowd is one of unity and compassion, or contrition and humility, other hearts might beat more strongly toward justice and righteousness.

I wonder if the disciples looked like the men in polo shirts carrying tiki torches who were photographed in last week's march in Charlottesville, VA as they said "Send her away!" Time and time again in the scriptures, we see Jesus' followers faltering in their own faith and stumbling over stones of fear. And, if we are honest, we have to admit that we often do the same.

Peter is a good example of this. In last week's lectionary reading Peter sinks when his heart is overcome by uncertainty in the midst of the stormy sea. In the garden of Gethsemane, Peter, again, stumbles over denial as he disavows his teacher. He does it for self-protection. We deny and evade for similar reasons. We, too, sink in fear. Sometimes we think we are maintaining justice and doing what is right when really, we are stumbling over our own anxiety or uncertainty. We cry "Send her away!", when we marginalize pain due to our own discomfort. We sync our hearts with systems of oppression when we remain silent in the face of injustice. We get tripped up over supremacy when we only tell select parts of our history. Too often in this nation's past our hearts, like those of the mercurial crowd around Jesus, have turned sinfully from "Send her away!" to "Crucify him". But, like the outcasts in our readings, there is hope for us.

This Canaanite woman comes with an empty heart, a heart wrung out from worry, a heart heavy with oppression. Jesus peers into the heart of this woman, and there he sees humility. The disciples' hearts are turned toward expulsion, but this woman's heart is turned toward the Lord. Her heart syncs with Jesus' heart, and the two together turn the crowd. The filling of an empty heart with justice and righteousness is an inspiring act of great faithfulness.

This is the good news for us today. While others – even we who follow Jesus - might want to send away the foreigner, the stranger, person deemed to be illegal, the person who looks different, or the one who shouts too loudly, Jesus responds with compassion and justice. Jesus answers prayers and Jesus sees the humanity in the "other".

Hearts can be set in stone. But, we recall from our stories that stones can be removed and repentance can begin. Even sinking, denying Peter became a foundation when Jesus named him the "rock" on which the church would be built. Whether it is through a slow melting like the drip of water over the

course of time, or whether it is a rapid removal under the cover of darkness, stones can be changed and hearts – and spaces – can be redeemed into foundations of love. Prayers are answered and demons are exorcised.

The prophet Isaiah invites us this morning to maintain justice and do what is right. It is not always easy to know what is right, or how to maintain justice. And sometimes what feels right or just to us might put our hearts out of sync with those we love. That is when we, like the Canaanite woman, must leave a sick child to throw ourselves at the feet of Jesus. We must bring our fears, our frustrations, our doubts, and our desperation to the one whom we call Lord. There we will find a heart turned toward compassion. There we will find a heart full of sacrifice.

And, when we throw ourselves at the feet of Jesus, we also find ourselves at the foot of the cross where pain and suffering are real. Where bodies are broken and blood is shed, where oppression seems to win. But remember, ours is an Easter faith, and in an Easter faith, the stone is rolled away. The stone is rolled away, and we greet the new day with shouts of thanksgiving. Giving thanks that we are liberated from the old ways of death to the ways of new life. Giving thanks that we are recreated as living stones. Giving thanks that our painful histories do not define us and that we can be gathered in (Is 56:8) with all those whom God redeems.

God gathers in the disciples even in the midst of their denials. God gathers in the Canaanite woman in her emptiness and despair. When we silence the marginalized and defend the indefensible; God gathers us in, too. God gathers us in at a table of fellowship and reconciliation. In a meal of equality, God gathers us in. In the breaking of bread and the passing of the cup, God gathers us in. When we reach the depth of despair and can do nothing but throw ourselves at the feet of our Lord, God fills us with a good faith. Hear these words of Isaiah again – words related to outcast and foreigners that seem, almost, to preach themselves this morning:

*Thus says the Lord ... I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off ... they will be joyful in my house of prayer. Their offerings will be accepted, for my house shall be called a house of prayer for **all** people. Thus says the Lord God who gathers the outcasts of Israel (... of every country: of the United States, and of the American South ...)*

I will gather others besides those already gathered.

God will gather us all in and not cut us off.

God will roll the stone away - to make this a house a prayer for all people.

God will answer our prayers.

And God will make us living stones to testify to God's justice and mercy.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.