

“Reject Prejudice!”

Looking at the Bulletin Cover for today, we see the quote from **Romans 11:32b**, *“so that He might show mercy to them all.”* That was the Apostle Paul’s concluding words in his argument, which he made about the Jews, who denounced non-Jews – the Gentiles and how God’s mercy was then directed toward both Gentiles and Jews. Paul’s position may have been persuasive to some of the Jews and Gentiles but, frankly, his rationale, was tortured and unneeded. The Almighty God is Merciful toward everyone – that is the Nature of our Divine Parent! The Apostle’s Pharisee background came through loud and clear when he tried to argue God’s Mercy for Gentiles and Jews was dependent on the disobedience of the Jews.

The fact of God’s Mercy being for everyone is a very important truth! The Gospel Lectionary Reading provides valuable insights, which testify to the Gift of our Creator’s Mercy – Grace – Forgiveness for all people. However, that is not necessarily apparent on the face of the report of the Scripture. Instead, a close examination of what Matthew reported, enables us to have the appropriate context to understand what Jesus was doing and communicating.

First, we need to remember, Matthew was the Synoptic Gospel, which was most closely aligned with the Jewish Religious Elite, especially with the legalists – the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law. As is the case with many other situations, persons, whose beliefs are being challenged, are often blind to the evidence, which is in plain sight. If Matthew had been more sensitive to what was actually happening in the situations he described in today’s Reading, then I believe he might have chosen to edit out some of those challenging aspects. Luke, who was much more aligned with the Greek Gentiles, chose to exclude the reports about the two encounters of Jesus in today’s Scripture. I suspect he did that because he saw them to be an embarrassment for Jesus. Mark reported the two episodes but, characteristically, he was much more terse than Matthew. Mark’s source either did not have some of the details or he did not understand the importance of some of them and, thus, did not recognize the value of reporting them. So, Matthew’s account provides much more information about the context in which the events in the Reading took place.

Let’s look at what makes up the context for the two parts of today’s Reading. First, it is important for us to understand, the Pharisees were both very influential among the Religious Elite, as well as, were major adversaries – enemies of Jesus. Our Savior threatened the Pharisees and their fellow members of the Religious Establishment because he challenged their claims about the Nature of God. The Pharisees and their allies puffed themselves up and diminished most other Jews, as well as, all the non-Jews – Gentiles, by claiming a person is not acceptable to God – not loved by the Almighty – ritually unclean, if they do not live the Jewish Religious Life in accordance with the Pharisees’ teachings – in order words, they were prejudiced against anyone, who did not follow their party line. They hated non-Jews and showed special anger toward the Samaritans, who were descendants of foreigners and practiced a different version of Judaism. One area of their claims was about eating food. For example, they demanded a good Jew wash his hands in a specific fashion before eating. They also claimed only certain foods prepared in a specific way could be eaten. Jesus exposed the falseness of those demands and claims. He revealed God’s Agape Love, Mercy, and Grace – Forgiveness are for everyone.

The first report in our Scripture was an example of Jesus’ challenge of the Pharisees and their allies on the subject of being acceptable to God – Ritually Clean with reference to the Jewish regulations and laws about hand washing and eating food. Matthew reported Jesus said in **verse 11**, *“It is not what goes into your mouth that makes you ritually unclean; rather, what comes out of it makes you unclean.”* What was especially telling about Jesus’ Disciples’ affinity toward the Pharisees and their failure to understand what Jesus was all about was what Matthew stated in the next verse – **verse 12**, *“Then the disciples came to him and said, ‘Do you know that the Pharisees had their feelings hurt by what you said?’”* Instead of trying to get on board with Jesus’ approach toward the Pharisees, his Disciples often took the side of the Pharisees! The Disciples, finally, had some recognition that Jesus’ message was at odds with the Pharisees and other Religious Elites. That opened them up to better understand what Jesus was trying to do. How do you think the Disciples hoped Jesus would respond to their concerns for the feelings of the Pharisees?

I doubt they expected him to say what he said! Jesus showed no sympathy for the Pharisees and their feelings. Instead, he claimed a special relationship with the Divine Parent and used very vivid imagery to explain how the Almighty would respond to the Pharisees’ prejudice and feelings. We are told in **verse 13**, *“‘Every plant which my Father in heaven did not plant will be pulled up,’ answered Jesus.”* With those words, Jesus clearly implied, the Pharisees’ beliefs and practices were not from God! The Pharisees’ hate and prejudice-filled statues and statutes are to be “pulled up” and destroyed! Let’s take a few moments to consider statues and statutes. According to my mother’s genealogy research, the Lee and Washington families were related and since we are related to the family, which connected them, I am related to both. Since the statues of Confederate Generals and other Confederate Leaders were erected during the times when white politicians were attempting to disenfranchise the descendants of slaves and create a new segregated society based on hate and prejudice to replace the slave culture, I have no qualms about removing them, even of my relative, Robert E. Lee. Those statues were not to honor American heroes – the Confederate Generals and Leaders had been traitors and tried to destroy the United States of America. Their statues were erected in the late 1800s to support the Jim Crow laws, which sought to undo the emancipation of newly freed slaves, and in the 1920s to validate lynchings and the oppression of the Blacks, and in the 1950s and 60s to discourage integration and undermine the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, which returned the vote and a segment of justice to African Americans.

In case Jesus’ implication was not clear enough for his Disciples, Jesus continued in **verse 14**, *“Don’t worry about them! They are blind leaders of the blind; and when one blind man leads another, both fall into a ditch.”* One would hope Jesus’ Disciples would have picked up on Jesus’ disdain for the Pharisees and their prejudicial approach but the evidence seems to be that of the opposite! The favorite of the Gospel of Matthew was Peter and the eldest of the Disciples challenged Jesus’ authority in **verse 15**, *“Peter spoke up, ‘Explain this saying to us.’”* Jesus was in no mood to allow Peter to undermine his authority or message, so he humiliated him and his intelligence and understanding. Our Savior went on to provide a very terse statement about how food goes through the mouth and digestive track.

Then, Jesus demolished the prejudice and character of his Pharisee enemies, saying in **verses 18-20a**, ***“But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these are the things that make you ritually unclean. For from your heart come the evil ideas which lead you to kill, commit adultery, and do other immoral things; to rob, lie, and slander others. These are the things that make you unclean.”*** Jesus’ implication was the prejudicial and selfish practices of the Pharisees were egregious to the Divine Parent! Clearly, Jesus called his followers to not follow the example and demands of the Pharisees but the Original Disciples had continuing difficulties on that subject.

With all of that being part of the context for the two situations in our Scripture Reading for today, Matthew went on to report in **verses 21-22a**, ***“Jesus left that place and went off to the territory near the cities of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman who lived in that region came to him.”*** So, the scene changed dramatically! Jesus and his Disciples were no longer in the Jewish nations where the Pharisees and their allies had significant authority and power. Instead, they were in Phoenicia – a foreign land where the majority of residents were not Jews. Why did Jesus take his Disciples there? I suspect he wanted to get his Disciples out of the sphere of Pharisee influence and to dramatically and radically reveal to them how God’s Mercy is for all people – even the foreigners!

Now, the pleas of the Canaanite woman for Jesus to heal her daughter and his response, as reported by Matthew and even Mark, were rather harsh and demeaning. Matthew seems to have not understood the context I have been describing, so he does not provide much explanation about what Jesus was really doing. However, Matthew does leave us some clues. Remember, Matthew reported in **verse 23**, ***“But Jesus did not say a word to her. His disciples came to him and begged him, ‘Send her away! She is following us and making all this noise!’”*** Notice, it was the Disciples, who seemed extremely annoyed by the Canaanite Woman. They were acting like the Pharisees – the folks Jesus had severely criticized earlier in the Reading! They were exhibiting extreme prejudice toward her, while Jesus had remained quiet in response to her cries for help. So, let’s recap, they were in a different country and a resident of that country was asking for help. The Disciples responded as a Pharisee would even though Jesus, only days before, had challenged the validity of the Pharisees’ beliefs and actions! Obviously, the Disciples had not gotten Jesus’ previous message about the Pharisees, so they needed a more dramatic challenge against the selfish prejudice and demeaning of others exhibited by the Pharisees. That is exactly what Jesus did! He sarcastically role-played the Pharisee response – acted like he agreed with it – with the way the Disciples had treated the woman. She played along with Jesus and he demonstrated her greater insight and faith, over against that of the Disciples, by saying in **verse 28**, ***“You are a woman of great faith! What you want will be done for you.’ And at that very moment her daughter was healed.”*** Again, unfortunately, Matthew or his source did not grasp what Jesus was doing, so their presentation can easily come across as revealing Jesus being prejudiced against the woman but, if that was the case, he would not have healed the woman’s daughter.

Both of the situations reported in today’s Scripture revealed Jesus wanted and continues to call his disciples to not follow the Pharisees’ example and their ways of prejudice and hate of others, who were not like themselves. Unfortunately, many churches, denominations, and their members have chosen to act like the Pharisees when it comes to how they will treat others unlike themselves. Our God Is Still Speaking emphasis and Jesus Christ call us to be our Divine Parent’s agents of Agape Love, Mercy, and Welcome! We are to reject prejudice and to support justice for all, especially those, who are vulnerable and/or oppressed!

Also, unfortunately, the past week or so has reminded us that there are some in our country, who have taken upon themselves to be so much like the Pharisees and their prejudices, that they look for opportunities to spread hate and anger toward anyone, who is not like themselves. And, further, they have been receiving encouragement and cover, even from the President of the United States. It is comforting that the Joint Chiefs of the United States Military, many elected Federal congresspersons and senators, Mitt Romney, many prominent business and labor leaders, and many in the Jewish community have come out against the President’s moral equivalence assertion that many fine persons were also among those, who protested with the KKKs, neo-Nazis, and white supremacists in Charlottesville, Virginia. It is very sad that many persons were injured and a young woman was killed by one of those white supremacy protestors.

Positively responding to Jesus’ call for us to not be like the Pharisees and their prejudice, we are to welcome all people and to work to persuade government officials and others to eliminate the support for hate and prejudice, which was so clearly expressed in Charlottesville. Let us join in the sentiments and actions of Susan Bro, the mother of the slain woman, Heather Heyer. The mother said at her daughter’s funeral, “I think the reason that what happened to Heather has struck a chord is because we know that what she did is achievable. We don’t all have to die. We don’t all have to sacrifice our lives. They tried to kill my child to shut her up. Well, guess what? You just magnified her.” Ms. Bro also said, “Find what’s wrong. Don’t ignore it, don’t look the other way. You make a point to look at it and say to yourself, ‘What can I do to make a difference?’ And that’s how you’re going to make my child’s death worthwhile. I’d rather have my child, but by golly, if I gotta give her up, we’re going to make it count.”

It’s time to make Heather Heyer’s death and the deaths of all of the others, who sought to overcome prejudice and hate count! It is time to make Jesus’ death count by rejecting hate and prejudice and sharing God’s Agape Love, Mercy, and Welcome with all people. Amen.