

Pentecost 11 August 16, 2020 proper 15

So today is the 243rd anniversary of the Battle of Bennington, properly known as Bennington Battle Day here in Vermont! I have amused myself in past years preaching about this state holiday in honor of a Revolutionary War battle that actually took place in neighboring New York state. But since today is the actual date, and under the pandemic and the topsy turvy way our lives are now so that time and even state or national holidays seem to be so disconnected from our lives, I thought it was a good idea to mention this again. One other little tidbit of Bennington Battle Day trivia I have learned is that the distinctive “Bennington Flag,” an early American flag most notable for the large “76” in the blue canton area of the flag along with the 13 stars, this flag was not actually flown during the Battle of Bennington, and most likely dates from the nineteenth century. So today we learn that there’s a flag that wasn’t flown at the battle that didn’t take place in Bennington. So Happy Bennington Battle Day, anyway, and it is always a good excuse just to take a day off in the middle of August!

Prayer: Most merciful and glorious God, this day we come together again in the presence of your Word, seeking your guidance and assurance for our lives. Open up our hearts and souls to your love in the name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

A couple of weeks ago Bishop Shannon mentioned in her sermon that in these times she is hearing the words of scripture very differently. We have also remarked on this several times recently during our weekly Bible study group

as well. And now, hearing Jesus talking about unwashed hands not defiling a person, I want to shout out, “No Jesus! Wash your hands, wear a mask, don’t touch your face!” Definitely the words of scripture seem to fall differently on our ears nowadays during this time of pandemic! But I think just as important as hearing the scriptures in a new way in light of the new times I which we live, it is also even more important to know the difference that this new way of hearing makes in our lives and for our faith as we move into these new times and new ways of being together as the church. What is the nature of God’s call to us in this time, during this pandemic I which we cannot gather together and during this time of great social upheaval in our land as we seek racial justice for all?

For the past few weeks, reflecting on the Gospel passages, we have heard about the importance of the presence of Christ in our lives with the stories about the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus walking on the water and stilling the storm. But, as important as Jesus presence in our lives might be, I think we have to ask *how* it makes a difference in our lives. Yes, in faith we acknowledge Jesus is with us, present with us even when we might not even be aware, present with us in the storms of life and present with us as we are fed, as we are given an abundance beyond our wildest imaginings. But even with that faith, even with its depth in our lives, in its surrounding us constantly, I still think that unless we can point to the way it makes a difference in our lives, unless we can say that the basic direction of our lives has changed and leads us in a new orientation, it is not really that important. This morning, however, if

we listen to Paul's letter to the early group of Christians gathered at Rome, we begin to hear of the way the presence of Christ makes a crucial difference in our lives. Paul speaks to the community gathered in the name of Christ at Rome of the quality of mercy: how mercy has been given to them despite their disobedience. And he goes on to say that we have all, every one of us, turned our backs on God at one point or another; that's just our nature, that's who we are; whether purposefully just because we can be so ornery, or done solely because we can be so careless and forgetful, literally without thinking, but it doesn't matter, God will show us mercy, show us mercy and forgiveness, show us the depth of God's love, just because that is what God does; that is who God is. Where our nature either makes us purposefully bad or just plain slothful, God's nature is to love: to love us as fully as we can be loved, to continue to love us through is all. It is just what God does; it is just who God is.

I think we see what this is about in the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman from Matthew's Gospel that we heard read this morning...this woman knows she needs Jesus: she know that Jesus can give her what is so far missing in her life: that Jesus can see her and give her the mercy she needs, no wonder she is so desperate, no wonder she is so pushy, and especially because she is not asking for herself, but for her daughter: she sees Jesus as the only chance for her daughter's health to be restored, she sees in Jesus that one desperate "Hail Mary" pass: as a woman, as a foreigner, as someone with no standing whatsoever for the people of Israel, as someone who is a nobody, a no one, someone who doesn't even rise to the level of full human existence, here this

woman pesters the disciples incessantly, driving them crazy as she attempts to get someone to take her seriously in her quest to find help for her for her seriously ill daughter.

Finally, the disciples can no longer take it and they ask Jesus to get rid of her; and Jesus seems to concur that she is really out of place: Jesus seems to be saying that his hands are tied: he is supposed to take care of the descendants of Abraham, and certainly not to this foreign woman. In some ways, Jesus seems pretty petty here, a clear case of need right in front of him, but then Jesus complains about the jurisdictional issues. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, brings up the issue of who is in his flock. Jesus says to her, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” To this woman, though, desperate about the health of her daughter, this answer is not going to do, so she presses Jesus further; she sees in Jesus the power he has as a Rabbi, as someone who is filled with the Spirit, to go beyond these distinctions. And so, with great respect and a boldness that is truly amazing, she kneels at Jesus’ feet and simply makes the plea, “Lord, help me,” Jesus then brings up the issue of fairness: this is a question of justice, that to take what belongs to another and give it to someone else. But the woman’s reply takes the conversation to a deeper level: she insists that there is an abundance in the power of God, that there will be more than enough for all: just like in the feeding of the five thousand there was an abundance to provide for all who were with Jesus, such an abundance that out of those five loaves and two fish, twelve full baskets of leftovers were gathered up. And here the miracle occurs: Jesus sees the depth of her faith, that this

woman, although a woman and a foreigner to Jesus is able to recognize that God's love is available to all, that this is not a zero sum game, but that through God's great mercy, a mercy without end, indeed she and her daughter are touched by the power of the love of God in Christ Jesus.

I think that we are in the place of that Canaanite woman as well: God is calling us to find the fullness of God's love in Jesus, but even deeper, God is challenging our faith that not only brings our lives to a deeper place, but that moves the world closer in the love of God as well. The Canaanite woman's simple but powerful plea, "Lord, help me" is not simply a request for her own sake, but for the sake of her daughter, seeking the best for those around her. In this time of pandemic, with the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives, with the economic disruption and suffering as more and more of our neighbors struggle as they are driven to the brink through loss of work and the increasing difficulty of providing for their families, having to make the difficult choices of spending what little they have on food or rent, making car payments of buying new clothing for their children, and with the great uncertainties we face not knowing what tomorrow might bring, the Canaanite woman's simple plea is constantly on our lips as well. Also, this pandemic has peeled back the cover on the great racial disparities in our country, and with the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, the racist policies that continue to take their toll on Black and Brown lives is now another issue we face where the Canaanite woman's plea, "Lord, help me" rings out just as deeply as well. As we see in Jesus' response to the Canaanite woman's plea, it is a question of justice, large

as they loom, the economic and racial inequalities that face us in our nation: and Jesus' loving response, that faith will save us, that God's loving providence will give us the power to share God's love by working and demanding justice for all, to take care of all as God's love and mercy are given freely to all, given to me and given to you, that no matter where I have strayed or you have strayed in the past, now God gives us a call to open our lives in trust, to open our lives in this difficult times to pray and act on behalf of those who are in need and distress in these times. This is how God's call now makes a difference in our lives during this time and how God's love in Jesus Christ continues to open our souls and to guide and lead us onward in the direction of God's way of love. As we will pray this morning in the collect set for this day, we will ask God to give us grace that we will thankfully receive the fruits of Christ's redeeming work and that by this grace we will follow daily in the blessed steps of Jesus' holy life. Thanks be to God for this great grace and thanks be to Christ for opening this way of love for us and all our world.

Amen.