

Grace and peace to each of you in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.
Amen

I hardly know where to begin this morning. If I had a good joke to share, I'd use it...but frankly, my heart is too heavy to begin that way.

We have just been through a week from hell.

- White supremacists and neo-Nazis spewing slogans of resentment, hatred and bigotry.
- Heather Heyer and a host of others killed or injured in a violent vehicular terrorist attack in Charlottesville, Virginia.
- Politicians ducking for cover, fearful of antagonizing their base.
- Rancorous public debates over the purpose and future of Civil War statues.
- Moral confusion and staff shake-ups in the White House.

Overwhelmed by these and other events of the past week, our SW MN Synod Bishop Jon Anderson has wearily confessed that he is “soul sick” ...literally sick to his stomach from what he has seen and heard of our nation’s on-going history of racism and discrimination.

Bishop Anderson acknowledged that we of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are a mostly white church and that the sin of failing to address racism falls squarely on us.

In a sermon from last Sunday, Pastor Yolanda Denson-Byers, who is a hospice chaplain in the St. Cloud area, spoke these words to the people of Resurrection Lutheran Church in St. Joseph, Minnesota.

“If we, in church, don’t have the moral courage to stand up at a time like this, our faith won’t mean much. I saw on Facebook, someone asked, if you ever wonder what you would do during the Holocaust, during the Civil War, during moments like these – you now know. You would do whatever you’re doing right now.

“If you ever wondered how you would stand up and be counted in a moment when destiny has seized us, whatever you do in this moment right here, is what you would do. And so in churches all over America, we have to say something that’s true.

“And what is true?” she asked.

“Jesus loves us, this we know...for the Bible tells us so. Red and yellow, black and white, we are precious in God’s sight.”

“And when we fail to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our mind, with all our soul, with all our strength, when we fail to love all of our neighbors as ourselves – it is SIN, my friends. Racism is sin. White supremacy is sin.”

Pastor Byers then said that it would have been far better if the real pastor of Resurrection Lutheran Church, a white man, rather than herself a black woman, had been there to preach this sermon.

“We (black and brown people) have been sayin’ it! We need YOU to say it. We need our white brothers and sisters in Christ to SAY IT!”

Senior Pastor David Lose of Mt. Olivet Lutheran Church in Minneapolis echoes that same sentiment: “...simply knowing that God loves all people is not enough,...we also need to proclaim the Gospel clearly, compellingly (and loudly)...Knowing what is right without speaking it in some way is not enough...(not nearly enough)!”

That’s where this morning’s Gospel story from Matthew comes into play. The Canaanite woman, though facing seeming rejection and humiliation at the hands of Jesus and his disciples, will not be silenced. She had heard the good news of God’s love for all people as evidenced in the stories about Jesus and his ministry, and that had created such a faith within her that she refused to be put off by Jesus’ declaration that he’d come to save the house of Israel: “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table. Have mercy on me and my daughter, Jesus.”

“Oh, woman,” Jesus responded, “your faith is something else...it’s terrific. What you have wished, you will receive. And at that very moment, the woman’s daughter was made well.”

The Canaanite woman, as Lose puts it, "...did not retreat to silence but spoke out, offering a testimony that rings down through the ages: 'See me! See me as a person, not as a woman or a Canaanite or a minority or a foreigner or someone from a different religion or as a burden. See me as a person and as a child of God.'"

Toward the end of her sermon to the folks in St. Joseph, Pastor Byers issued this challenge: "...(we of) the ELCA (are) going to have to decide whose side we're on. We're either on God's side – the side of love, the side of justice, the side of righteousness, the side of mercy, the side of kindness, the side of goodness, the side of faithfulness – or we're on the side of the folks with tiki torches? Mowing down men and women and boys and girls in the streets."

And then, she said: "If we keep Jesus to ourselves – shame on us! And if we don't tell everybody that God loves them, then shame on us! And if we don't confront racism wherever we find it, even if it's at our own kitchen tables, then we're complicit in this sin!"

"You have heard the call to action. You don't have to go somewhere far away. You don't have to get on a plane and go save somebody in Africa. Stay at home, at your own table, and change your little piece of the world for Jesus."

Well, as I said at the beginning of my sermon, it's been a hell of a week...but there's heaven ahead where God's word of grace and love for all people is proclaimed to ears that desperately need to hear.

Be of good courage, and peace be with you, my friends. In the name of Jesus, Amen.