

First Congregational Church of Montague Trinitarian

September 6, 2015

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Sermon: A Priesthood of All Believers

Mark 7:24-37

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight our Lord and Redeemer. Amen

How many of you have heard, or are familiar with, the term, “priesthood of all believers.” It refers to the fact that we are all called to minister to one another as we are all part of the body of Christ. No one of us is more priestly than another. We are each called to proclaim the good news of God's love and forgiveness to one another and out in the world.

This is well grounded in prophecy found in Exodus and Isaiah in the Hebrew Bible and in many scriptures found in the Christian bible in the books of 1 Peter, Ephesians, Hebrews, 2 Corinthians, Acts, Revelations and the gospel of John.

According to scripture each person is both gifted with and has the responsibility to approach God directly and represent God's grace in the

world. There is not one person who is not a priest, or minister, in this congregation.

I may have been called to pastor, preach and teach on a regular basis but I am not the only minister here among us. Of course, there is that joke that went around when we were in our visioning process a few years ago... I don't think it has left us yet... I was called the "hired Christian!" representing the wish that all of us have to please let someone else do this difficult work of being Christian for me! But, alas that just doesn't work does it?

We all answered that call... the call of Jesus to follow him. We answered that call when we were baptized... or our parents answered for us. We answered that call when we joined the church. We answer that call each Sunday when we attend church or anytime we are at work or out in the community and remember we live because he lives in us.

And we answer that call each day we get up and thank God for all that we have in our life. We are Christians, followers of the Way of Jesus. We are followers of the way of peace and the way of love... which means each day we look for ways to create peace and ways to respond to the

demands in our life and in the world with love. When we act in peace and in love, compassion sprouts and justice blooms.

This is what happens in today's reading from the book of Mark. In response to the woman's challenge compassion sprouted in Jesus' heart and justice bloomed... he extended to her the gift that he extends to all. Her words triggered in Jesus the awareness of what he was doing and what he needed to do to make it right.

This reading often makes us uncomfortable because it is one of the few scriptures that shows a "not so divine" side of Jesus. When the Syrophenician woman approached him, instead of being open and loving, he responded in the way of the day... with a derogatory slur. His behavior was very human, which should give us great hope. If Jesus had these human reactions and turned them around, so can we.

Jesus refers to his followers, his posse, his people as "the children who must be fed first." He says, "It isn't right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." Meaning his time and his healings belonged to the Jews who were loyal to his teachings of peace and love. This brazen woman was not part of his group and was a Gentile to boot. She was an outsider.

We expect Jesus to be above the typical response of a male from that region and in that day. But, his initial response was not above. His initial response was the standard of the day... referring to the gentile woman as a dog.

It was common street talk. It was a way of putting her down for her gender and her race. It was a sexist and racist response. But, this woman, thank the Lord, calls him on it! This woman speaks the gospel truth to Jesus and he recognizes it. Immediately, he sees how his actions excluded her from the gifts of the kin-dom. He changes his way and sends her home to be with her child whom he has already healed with his love.

Peace, love, compassion, justice... that's what Jesus offered then, most of the time, and what Christ offers still, all of the time. And this is what we, the priesthood of all believers, the body of Christ, are called to proclaim and extend to one another.

This is a story about boundaries. It shows how the lines we set up according to our human bias do not make sense when held up to the light

of the good news... all are welcome in God's kin-dom. Jesus was consistent with his teaching to break down barriers between people.

What can we be doing to break down barriers today as Jesus did back then... when he spent time with, ate with, helped, taught, touched... gentiles, women, children, lepers, and tax collectors, all outcasts then, many outcasts, or oppressed, still now?

Let's ask ourselves, what are our personal barriers that need to be bridged and, what steps can we take, large or small, to bridge them?

And, let us pray, God help us to find a way to bridge the gaps.

What are society's barriers that we Christians can shine light on and reframe as reflections of God's love? Can we lean on the arms of Jesus to find the courage to step out in ways we have never stepped out before ...ways that may feel unnatural or uncomfortable at first.... but ways that we know, from the examples Jesus leaves us, are his ways. Can we support each other in the new steps we take?

God we pray, help us to follow the ways of Jesus especially when we find it difficult or confusing to do so.

We are called to be priests to one another... to preach and teach the good news of God's all-inclusive love. How can you expand, or deepen, the ways you already minister to the world? What new thing can you do today, or tomorrow, or the next day, to live into your calling as Christian, as minister, as priest of God's word?

May we each be guided and strengthened to live more deeply into our calling as priests of God's word and God's world.

And may we all say Amen!

Amen

If you remember, in the scripture reading last week from the beginning of the 7th Chapter of Mark, Jesus made a point of teaching that the purity laws (the tradition of the elders) were human made and not a reflection of God's law of love. Rev. Melissa Florer-Bixler writes in a reflection on that scripture, "He calls the Pharisees hypocrites who "abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.""

At times, it can be difficult to determine right from wrong... How can we not dishonor those of the past and still be loving in the present? Or maybe the better question is how can we do both... both honor the traditions and memories of the past and be bearers of the light and the love of God in response to the needs of this day and time?

In a great article on this subject, Art Lindsley says "there are at least four positive implications of the priesthood of all believers for our lives."

Two spiritual privileges and two responsibilities “for our work in the Church and world.” The two privileges are that we have direct access to God through our work and our prayers and that we are able to offer sacrifice to God through prayer, praise, thanksgiving, repentance, justice, kindness and love.”

The first responsibility is to bear witness to Christ by announcing, explaining, saying, testifying, persuading, confessing, charging, rebuking, admonishing, exhorting, etc... according to your gifts.... meaning in your everyday life, through your work... living your life as a prayer.

The second is to be an agent of reconciliation. In other words to “mediate Christ's love into a dark and troubled world.” We are to use our gifts to lead “people in the Church and in the world to be reconciled to God and to each other.”