

*Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 14.viii.2005, 9:00 a.m.
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue, Chanceford Township, York Co., Pennsylvania
Isaiah 56:1,6-8; Psalm 67; Romans 11:1-2a,29-32; Matthew 15:[10-20] 21-28
Ante-Communion, LBW Setting 2*

*J. J. !**

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was and
Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

The 'intelligent design' controversy seems to have spawned a whole array of articles and documentaries and docudramas about physical anthropology, a subject I enjoyed as almost no other in college. There was the truly learned and concise article in the *York Sunday News* not long ago by my dear brother pastor, the Rev. Steven Thomas, who is trained and skilled as a chemist as well as as a theologian. The cover story of this week's *Time* is dedicated to the subject of 'creationism' vs. 'evolutionism.' Even in your September issue of *In His Footsteps* you will find a modest contribution to this discussion. I would like to begin today by stirring the pot of our interest in human origins a little more still.

Before some of you check out to the realm of sleep or heat exhaustion, please let me specify our focus. The human origin in which I am specifically interested today, because of today's Gospel, is

what we might call the prehistory of our being *ornery* and downright *nasty* critters who not only hunt and attack other animals, but *our own kind*. Since our prehistoric *Cro Magnon* forefathers starved out and murdered our last surviving *Neanderthal* cousins, the human mind has been hard-wired for race, ethnic and class hatred—ever since the first brother murdered his brother, as the Bible witnesses in the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis. There is *no idea* that so quickly takes root in the human mind as the thought that *that person, that group, 'those people'* are *different* from me and *my kind*, a *threat* to me and to *my kind*, 'unclean' in some vague way, if not in the ancient, religious sense of the term. Almost nothing can change that attitude, unless it is recognized for what it is—an illusion and a *lie*, defilement of the human person that soils the one out of whose mind and mouth it issues.

We have, I pray and hope, come a little way toward recognizing that from where we European or European-descended 'white folks' were a century ago. In 1922, when the politicians of France were becoming embarrassed by the mounting numbers of French and French colonial war dead of World War I, the order was

given to wind up the task of exhumation and identification of those who had died on the Western Front, to instead build war memorials throughout France, especially the memorial to the 'Unknown Soldier' to be located right in the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. It was better, some observed cynically, for the people to think only of the *one* 'unknown' soldier than of the official toll of 300,000, let alone of the more accurate estimate of **1.5 million** French war dead. And, so, the search for an *unknown* from each District of the great Republic of 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity' began in earnest. The bodies should be in each and every case, an 'appropriate' unidentified body, a 'true' Frenchman, according to a directive discretely passed down the chain of command to the officers of the Army War Graves Commission. No Yanks, Tommies or *Boche* were to be picked by mistake, and absolutely *no* yellow French Indochinese, black Senegalese or swarthy Moroccans or Algerians would do.

One wonders what the process was like for the Germans, the Belgians, the British and other European nations with colonies, or *for the Americans* who held colonial territories and whose own population had produced many a 'Doughboy' of color, perhaps not

quite representative of the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave. It was, after all, still an era here at home when African Americans still could not vote for the most part and were routinely lynched in many states of the Union, and entertainment to which people brought their children and a picnic lunch, a festive occasion of which professional photographs were made and sold in local drugstores for a nickel. Is it not a relief that all that is over, now?

[Jesus] called the crowd to Him and said to them: "Listen and understand! It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles."

-- Matthew 15:10

The Disciples play dumb when Jesus teaches them so clearly in this parable that we become and are the person we *speak*, just as surely as we become and are the person we act out in other ways. 'Cleanness and uncleanness' before God is very much a matter of being that person who reflects the divine image in word and deed or *not*. In teaching this, Jesus stands clearly in line with the great Prophets of Israel, especially Isaiah. Isaiah, in today's First Reading, had a vision of even foreign peoples bringing their offerings to the living God, their strange foreign offerings in their strange foreign ways, a vision of these non-Hebrew people of all nationalities and

religions, laying the best they had to offer on the LORD'S altar in Jerusalem, a vision of the living God *accepting* those offerings, seemingly with no questions asked. For Isaiah and for Jeremiah, for Amos and Hosea, it is what comes from the heart and mind of the worshipper that matters, *the person we really are* before Almighty God, Who can neither deceive nor be deceived, before God Who sees us through the cloak of nationality or race or language or culture. Through the power of speech, as well as concrete action, we are called to reflect and live out this inclusive, universal vision of humanity in our dealings with others, in our attitudes and in our speech about them. Jesus teaches this to His Disciples, and He teaches it to them again, because they pretend not to understand.

But what, then, is the very next thing the Disciples say? What does *Jesus* say when, in the next instant, He encounters a foreigner who is seeking the mercy of the living God, just the sort of foreigner Isaiah had in mind? What do they all say, Jesus and His Disciples? They say what they have heard, over and over again. They say of and to this *foreigner* in her own land what they have heard from their mother's knee. This Canaanite, this Philistine, this *Arab* and this

woman dares to approach a great teacher in Israel, a young Rabbi on the ascendant, a great and righteous man Who dares to contradict the Pharisees, and Who does it with such eloquence and style, *their* Rabbi, *their* teacher, but not *hers!*

Look what comes out of *her* mouth! “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon Lord, help me!” For her daughter’s sake, she swallows her pride in order to speak to an age-old enemy of her own people. She recognizes and bows before the power of God to save in Jesus, power about which she has heard from others. In so doing, she stands before God in pure faith.

But what comes out of the *Disciples’* mouths? Prejudice. Contempt. And what comes out of *His* mouth? The same, and insulting condescension besides: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel It is not fair to take what is for the children and to throw it to *the dogs.*” As a Jew in ancient Israel, Jesus was not very far along the evolutionary path to recognizing the dog as the noble companion on life’s journey the canine in fact *is*. To First Century Jesus of Nazareth, Son of the household of Joseph and Mary

of Nazareth, the dog was, along with the pig, an *unclean* animal before God, never mind what He had just said about what makes us 'clean' and 'unclean' in God's sight. And He compared her to *that*, effectively calling this woman who loved her mentally ill daughter a *filthy dog?!*

Does this shock *you*? Just imagine how it made *her* feel! She had heard so much about Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth, reputed to be descended from King David, perhaps the One who would lead the Jews and then the whole human race to wholeness and salvation as God's Anointed, as Messiah, as the Christ. She had undoubtedly heard of His kindness, of His mercy, of His miracles, of His healing, of His compassion on tax collectors and even on prostitutes and others who lived outside the Law of Moses. 'Surely,' she must have thought, 'He will hear me and grant my plea, for I come asking for nothing for myself, but only that my daughter would be restored to her right mind.' But what does she hear?: 'Get away from me, you Arab *dog!*'

To my mind, there is no greater miracle in salvation history than what happens next, the rebirth that happens in the very next

instant, in the eternity of a moment between Jesus' insult and that unnamed woman's plea for her daughter, no matter what He might call her: "'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, *great* is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.'" Then and *there* our humanity was redeemed from its bondage to its own foul mind and mouth, and in Christ, we are offered that liberation, too, *as long as we do not take offense at that liberation.*

Even when such filth as the racial appellations and epithets too many of us heard growing up no longer cross most of our lips, our society continues in unclean bondage to the racial lie as long as hate-mongers such as the KKK, the Aryan Nation and the American Nazi Party command a following among us. Were our nation someday to muster the courage and will of the British to put those who incite mass violence either behind bars or out of the country, *those* organizations and their cowardly leaders should be at the top of the terrorist list. But neither incarceration nor deportation of others would redeem the mind and heart that conceives and then speaks and acts on the lie that we, whoever we think 'we' are, deserve by

right of birth to judge and to exclude others who are created not in *our* image, but in the image of God.

That redemption happens in that eternal moment Jesus experienced, as he turned to face a poor and desperate woman from a hated group, a group *He* had learned to despise and dismiss from His youth. That redemption of our way of seeing, of hearing and of speaking of and to others happened in His very own humanity, and it can happen in us as well through Him. 'Speak for yourself,' you may be tempted to think. 'I'm not a racist. What does all this have to do with me or, more to the point, with us as a congregation?' I am not sure, but I would like to find out. The Pennsylvania State Police report on the incidence of various kinds of violent crime in our great Commonwealth, not only the keystone of independence but the cradle of tolerance in this nation's history. What the State Police reports about York County is not easy to hear, for our County has among the highest number of incidents of 'bias crime,' i.e., crimes of violence inspired by race, ethnic or religious hatred, in all of Pennsylvania. And, within York County, our southern part of the County reports the largest number of those crimes.

I believe that, where we need to, we can change our minds through the change that comes through remembering our Baptism and rebirth in Christ Jesus, in Whom God's love and mercy toward all people shone, but not without a struggle with the humanity He sharers with us. I believe this because *Jesus'* mind was changed, because *Jesus* did not speak further out of the hatred He had inherited but out of the dignity He held at the core of His being as the Son of His Heavenly Father, the Father of the widow and the orphan, the Father of all the oppressed, the Father of this Arab woman with a sick child. And I believe that, if what the State Police crime statistics say is true, *we* can make a difference for the Kingdom of God in this community, that that may be part of the reason we are still here after 125 years, because, *after* 125+ years, Christ has something very special for us to do. I believe that the Spirit of the Father and of the Son will give us the wisdom and the strength to do that special thing, that the Kingdom of God, which *is coming and is already here*, will come also through *us*, as the Catechism teaches.

How will it come? It *will* come the way it has already come, here and around the world: through the way we treat others, through

the way we speak or refuse to speak about others, through the jokes and epithets we refuse to tell or to hear, through—please God!—the opportunity to welcome people who do not look just like us to visit here, to worship here, and, if the Holy Spirit so leads them, to belong here, *and* through the opportunity to stand by those who are threatened or attacked by others because of their skin, their nationality, their religion, or whatever makes them visibly or socially different from those who persecute them. May God grant it for Jesus' sake, out of whose mouth came mercy and acceptance and love: "Woman great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was *healed instantly.*" And she would not be the last! ✠Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit both now and forever. ✠Amen.

S. D. G.!**

**Jesu juva!* = 'O Jesus, help!' abbrev. 'J.J.!'

***Soli Deo Gloria!* = 'To God alone be the glory!' abbrev. 'S.D.G.!'