

NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST — LECTIONARY 20 A 2011
Isaiah 56:1, 6-8; Psalm 67; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:10-28
August 14, 2011
Central, Anchorage

WHY CHRISTIAN?

Why Christian? Why believe, why love and worship God? Why follow Jesus? Why do we care what the LORD God says? Thus says the LORD: Maintain justice, and do what is right. Why should we care? It's a dog-eat-dog world. "Survival of the fittest" and all that. The poor get poorer; the rich get richer. God weeps for the shame of it. Should I care? God's prophet rages against the injustice. Should I care? So long as I get mine, why should I care about the rest? Why Christian?

Some of the Jews, God's "chosen people," thought they had it all sewn up, with God on their side. They had forgotten that God had blessed them to be a blessing to others—foreigners, strangers, even enemies. Why should they care about those others, outsiders, Gentiles? Though God's chosen people were often untrue to God's covenant with them, God was always true to his word of promise. God's love is steadfast. But why should I care? Why Christian?

Perhaps I'll find a religion that makes me feel good, a spiritual practice that feeds my soul, that helps me cope with life, that kind of justifies my existence. I'll feel right with creation and with the Creator, whoever that is. In Jesus' day, the Pharisees had it figured out. They had a tight, well-organized spiritual system. They were on top of things, feeling good about themselves, reckoning their existence before God was justified. So, being the spiritual experts they were, they offered helpful criticism to Jesus and his disciples. "Follow the religious rules, and life is good." But Jesus challenged them: "Hypocrites! You honor God with your lips, but your hearts are untrue, your worship is false. You cheat your own father and mother and call it good."

What does Jesus offer? Does he offer a competing plan for getting ahead? Spiritual steps to holiness? No. He says that the purity codes and the food rituals are a sham unless they comport with holy living, with doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with God. What goes into our mouths matters less than what comes out of our mouths. How do we live? Do we love our neighbors as ourselves?

So then, it seems odd and ironic that when the Canaanite woman comes to Jesus asking healing for her daughter, Jesus does not welcome her, but dismisses her, as an unclean Gentile. She comes to Jesus, shouting after him in an unseemly manner, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." Jesus, the Jewish man, does not answer her, a Canaanite woman. The disciples tell Jesus to send her away. He says to her, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." She pushes her way through to get right in front of Jesus and kneels in his path, pleading, "Lord help me." He says, "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." She says, "Yes, Lord yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." She receives not crumbs, but the whole loaf. Her daughter is healed.

Now, I don't know why Jesus treats her the way he does, at least initially. Your guess is as good as mine. But I do know that her persistence, her perseverance for the sake of her daughter, is a wonderful example of the dogged determination of faith. Jesus hears and heeds her plea. She does not receive mere crumbs from the table, for Jesus inserts into the table another leaf.

So, why Christian? Always, there's the assumption that being Christian and discipling Jesus is for the sake of getting something, whether eternal salvation, i.e., saving our skins from the fires of hell and going to the our mansion in the sky, or it's all for the sake of status, honor and prestige here on earth, so that other people will regard us with respect. Well, frankly, these days, many wonder why anyone bothers. Our culture is so mature, grown-up that we see no reason for being religious. It's all ancient superstition, or some such. So, why Christian?

Do you catch any hints from today's readings? Do you hear something about gaining eternal life? About earning worldly respect and prestige? The Isaiah reading mentions salvation, but he's talking about a very worldly form of deliverance, in which Jews and Gentiles are joined together, as the covenant-making God gathers them together as one. Paul says that Jews and Christians are one under the providence of God. Jesus says that living within God's covenant is not about getting or earning God's good pleasure. God already loves. No, living in God's covenant means loving our neighbors as ourselves, loving outsiders and enemies, being an agent of God's healing. In the incident with the Canaanite woman, Jesus shows what he means. God breaks barriers. Why Christian, simply said, is about living in the love, justice and peace of God. It's not about getting something, but about being someone, namely, who we are in the wonderful reign of God.

Dear friends, Christians, Christ-believers and Christ-followers are people ready to put another leaf into the table. God's justice and righteousness reach out to include strangers, foreigners, outcasts, so that God's house shall be a house of prayer for all peoples.

Like the Canaanite woman, God acts with dogged determination, including outsiders, reconciling rifts and divisions between people, to heal brokenness and sin, distrust and estrangement. Thus, in Christ, the church encompasses the world just as God's love encompasses the world. God does not ignore us, but hears our pleas for healing and reconciliation, then puts another leaf in the table for us, teaching us the "why" of Christian—to make the table bigger.

To God Alone Be Glory.

Amen.