

Tomorrow, August 21, 2017, a total solar eclipse will momentarily blot out the sun for many in the United States. The moon will pass directly in front of the sun, turning day into night. From Minnesota, we'll experience it as a partial eclipse...but I imagine it will still appear strange, magnificent, eerie.

We've been able to predict that this total eclipse would appear for years and years. Our precise study of the moon, the stars, and our planet have given us the ability to know precisely the wondrous workings of the cosmos.

But I can't help but to think of the countless people who lived on this planet before astronomical explanations were able to account for such a sight. Imagine the sun suddenly vanishing in the middle of the day. Imagine seeing an inexplicable large dark blot slowly creeping across our source of light and life, until, eventually, it was gone. For those in the path of the full eclipse, the sun will be swallowed completely, and for a few minutes in the middle of the day, the temperature will drop, the birds will stop singing, and frogs and crickets will start chirping.

A mysterious terror, I would imagine, for those who experienced this without scientific explanations to reassure them. When the light is hidden, when darkness descended, it may have even felt as though our very existence was threatened. It may have felt as though the world was ending.

Well, my friends, I feel this week as though our nation has been going through its own kind of total eclipse. Darkness has overshadowed the light. Fear and terror have swallowed us up. We have seen the images from Charlottesville, and we can't deny that the darkness of racism, white supremacy, and hatred continues to threaten our very humanity.

For a few hours last Friday night, fear came not as a daytime eclipse but as a nighttime rally of torch-wielding white supremacists yelling Nazi slogans like “blood and soil,” and “Jews will not replace us.” By the end of the day on Saturday, one counter-protestor and two state troopers were dead, and pictures of swastikas, Klansmen, and other white nationalist symbols were engrained in the minds of our nation, adults and children alike.

An eclipse. When hatred shows its face in such force, it’s hard to remember the light. It’s terrifying and disgusting and must be called out and denounced by all of us, including and especially by those who find themselves in seats of power in our nation.

So then, as I stared into the darkness of this spiritual, disorienting eclipse, I looked at our gospel text for today praying for a word of peace from Jesus. Jesus Christ, the light of God that has come into the world. And, to be honest, he disappointed me. The story of the Canaanite woman in Matthew’s gospel presents one of the more complicated, perplexing, unclear moments of Jesus’ entire ministry!

But, church, I believe that it’s also a moment that we who today recognize more than ever the need to examine and root out racism in our midst should pay close attention to.

Jesus and his disciples travel to Tyre and Sidon, cities well off the beaten path, in Canaanite territory. First, it’s important to notice that Jesus chooses to travel to a place where he knows his disciples will inevitably encounter outsiders. Canaanites, remember, were the people marked for extermination back in the book of Joshua. They were people who long ago were killed and kicked off the land in order to make way for the Israelites.

Canaanites, you see, were an ancient enemy more than a current one. Jesus' disciples would have known the history, but they would not have felt threatened by this Canaanite woman. They may even have believed that they held no current grievance or prejudice towards her. The conflict between the Jews and the Canaanites was a thing of the past, they believed. It had been resolved. Emancipation had come. It was a done deal, they thought.

No, the reason they were annoyed, they tell Jesus, wasn't because she was a Canaanite! It was because she was loud. A nuisance. Making noise in the street. Causing a scene. "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us," they say. But there she is, on her knees, calling out to Jesus for mercy, and for healing for her daughter.

How nice it would have been if Jesus had simply said, "Get up and go, your faith has healed you," or something to that effect. But he doesn't. Instead, he first refuses to help her. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel," he says. In other words, "you don't belong to the people that I have come to save." First Israel, *then* all nations...or so Jesus thought.

But this persistent, nameless woman begs again. "Lord, help me." You see, she sees in Jesus perhaps something that he did not yet recognize. She recognized the wideness of his mercy, the universality of his power and his message. She knew that reconciliation, that healing, *was* possible with Jesus. So she did not give up so quickly.

And then, *now*, we might think that Jesus would say the words we need him to say. We would hope that the light of Christ would shine upon her pain and set her free. But instead, Jesus calls her a dog. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," he tells her.

How rude. How strange. That our Savior would seem to argue with a woman in great need, calling her a dog. How is this good news for us today? How is God's truth and light reaching out to us through this gospel, especially in a time of such discord and hatred?

Might I suggest, my friends, that Jesus is showing us something valuable here. Jesus, who is the way and the truth and the life, shows us a very human and necessary way forward. As we confront the sin of racism that is part and parcel of our society, we, like Jesus, find ourselves owning up to some ancient and unexamined prejudices.

Though Jews and Canaanites had not fought for centuries, there was a steady, subtle dehumanizing that Jesus would have learned in his community growing up. And Jesus, *fully* human, cannot help but to internalize – to take into his own body – some ugly, insidious stuff about those outside his community, *those* Canaanites.

Nelson Mandela writes, “No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”

God becomes flesh in order to show us, in an instant, how necessary it is that we be transformed in our own hearts and bodies into people who never consider ourselves superior to others. Jesus shows us the way forward, the way to transform us from people who have learned to hate and into the people that God created for love.

So what does he do? Well, the same Jesus who calls this woman a dog continues by listening to her, by seeing her fully as a beloved child of God, by changing his mind, and by offering healing. For Jesus, it takes but an instant. For us, it may take years or even a generation to weed out the deep prejudices and fears that we carry.

By hearing her cries, by offering healing, Jesus rejects the parts of his culture and group identity that had taught him to hate.

When it comes to the racism and hate that threatens to blot out the light these days...the good news we hear today, my friends, is not that Jesus is just going to swoop down from the clouds and make it all better. The good news – the deeper, truer, harder news – is that Jesus goes with us in engaging the transformative work of love that we all must undergo. Jesus has been there. He has met the Canaanite woman. Jesus has risked vulnerability, has examined the hidden and shameful parts of his culture and exposed them to the light.

As a church, we have clearly and unequivocally denounced racism, white supremacy, and hatred. But what I hear God calling us to in this gospel is to, with Christ, begin digging into the hard, messy, beautiful work of examining racism and prejudice wherever it exists in order to transform our community and hearts to share in the very love of Christ that we know by faith.

It is a love that goes to Tyre and Sidon, to communities off the beaten path. It is a love that listens. It is a love that is not quiet or passive. It is a love that tells the truth and that risks saying it out loud for the sake of transformation.

Finally, the love of Christ is a love and a light that the darkness cannot overcome. It is a love that resists evil. It is a love that embraces the whole cosmos, that brings us back from whatever terror or evil or grief threatens to eclipse the sun.

Last Wednesday night, four days after white supremacists rallied in Charlottesville, thousands of people gathered in the same spot where torches of hatred burned a few nights before. There were no large, blazing torches at this rally. Instead, there were thousands of small, flickering candles. As he said to the Canaanite woman, we might hear Jesus saying to their resolve and defiance in the face of hatred, “Great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”

Let God's justice and mercy be done in Charlottesville and in New Brighton, MN, among us. God in Jesus Christ is calling us to journey by faith towards the light of love. Thanks be to God. Amen.

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE.  
Passing of the Peace

“La paz del Señor”

“Peace be with you”

“God’s peace be with you”

Go down the aisle sharing peace with everyone.

Take your time

We get to be reconciled to each other, to speak words of peace

A powerful moment