

I was away last week spending time with my parents and other members of my family. We were lucky enough to have Rev. Yolanda, chaplain of Howard University, here at St. Patrick's to talk about the violence in Charlottesville in light of the Gospel. From what I understand, we were blessed to have her wisdom.

We must admit that racism exists and that we (and I am speaking for people who look like me) are the reason. It didn't start on January 20 of this year, it has festered for hundreds of years in these parts and it will not be smoothed away quickly and quietly. It will take hard work not by the people who are persecuted, but by those who hold the upper hand. We have got to cry out so that God's peace may consume us.

I want St. Patrick's to be a place in which we can feel safe to talk about how racism infects our lives because that is the only way to truly address it.

Our gospel today begins with a teaching about tradition. At the time, people were leaning on the rules about what should and should not be eaten. Following these rules split people into camps (the good and the bad). In response, Jesus said, "it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles."

When I was a kid, I was told that sticks and stones will break bones, but words will never hurt them. Literally that is true. You cannot break bones with words, but that doesn't mean that words don't cause pain.

The events in Charlottesville were tragic, but they were made worse by the words. Sad. The words of our president had no empathy or even a breath of understanding about the underlying issue. The way that our president chooses to use words baffles me. I have no idea how he can call out (demean) people who coherently advocate for a position (which is their right) and not call out others who have incited violence that resulted in the loss of life.

Remember that Jesus was teaching about traditions and how traditions can become so powerful that they overshadow the most important thing: love. Whether the tradition is clean and unclean food, sabbath laws, or racism, it is important to remember what is at the heart and it better be love.

So, maybe we should make these words of Jesus a bumper sticker:

It's not what goes into the mouth that defiles, but what comes out.

Now, I have been talking about the first 10 verses of our gospel lesson. I have conveniently not spoken about the last portion of this gospel. This story of Jesus bothers me the most of any in the gospels. The Canaanite woman asks Jesus to help her daughter and Jesus not only denies her but calls her a name. This is not the way Jesus is supposed to act (nor is it the way he acts in other gospel episodes).

The heroic action, in this story, is the faith of the Canaanite woman to persist and eventually gain what she was looking for (healing for her daughter and a place at the table). There are many who try to interpret this scripture in a way that lessens its impact. I am not going to get into all of them. This story is supposed to shake up the hearer. It is supposed to support the lesson that Jesus just taught about tradition. The Canaanites were the unclean, the outsiders, the foreigners, the enemies, the forgotten ones. On top of being a Canaanite, she was a 1st century woman which even lowers her more in the social caste.

And yet, when she persists, she is told that she has great faith. Last week, in the previous story, Peter, the ultimate disciple, is told that he has little faith. What comes out of your mouth, what comes from your heart (your faith), is much more important than all the things that tradition

says are important (class, nationality, and race). This story reinforces the one we heard about tradition. Tradition has the power to defile; we must stay focused on God's love.

Does this have something to do with what is going on today? Yes!!! We are in the midst of a discussion about what has been and what should be. That is a great conversation if we root it in God's love. The thing is, it can be transferred to another part of our being: our desire for power and safety and control and then the conversation can go in a different direction. It is not about forgetting our past, it is about confronting the future. No one act is going to alleviate racism, it is a trajectory that requires deep reflection on what is important and it will take generations to make noticeable improvements. It will take all of us participating in that work.