

PROPER EIGHTEEN, PENTECOST 16, SEPTEMBER 8, 2024

Will Campbell was a Baptist minister who grew up on a cotton farm in rural Mississippi in a place known for its poverty, segregation, and lynchings. The Bibles in his family church were emblazoned with a symbol of the Ku Klux Klan. When he was seven, Campbell decided to be a preacher, and at age seventeen he was ordained by family members at East Fork Baptist Church. After serving in World War II as a combat medic, he completed studies at Yale Divinity School.

Will then went on to pastor a small church in Louisiana in 1952 which fizzled after two years. He then became the Director of Religious Life at the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss), where his radical views on civil rights and racial integration led to hate mail and death threats. He resigned after two years and in 1956 took a post at the National Council of Churches.

In 1957, Campbell was the only white person present who was invited by Martin Luther King Jr. at the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. A few months later, he was one of four people who escorted "The Little Rock Nine" group of African American students attempting to enroll in Little Rock Central High School. In 1961, he accompanied the "Freedom Riders" in their efforts to integrate interstate bus travel despite white mob violence. And in 1963, he joined Dr. King's boycotts, sit-ins and marches in deeply segregated Birmingham.

Throughout his career Will fought for those who were oppressed. He opposed capital punishment and campaigned for equal rights for women, gays, and lesbians. But bit by bit across those first volatile twenty years, he sensed that something wasn't quite right. He found himself with "a call but no steeple," a sense of failure and self doubt." He came to distrust all movements and institutions, especially the church.

Eventually, Bill found himself on a farm in rural Tennessee where he freelanced as one of the most irreverent Christians ever to infuriate the church. He farmed, wrote over twenty books, hosted a steady stream of troubled people both famous and unknown (Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson, Jimmy Carter, etc.), wrote country music, visited the sick and the imprisoned, and continued his curmudgeonly protest against the powers that be.

But as he grew older Campbell discovered how readily he hated those who hated and how easily he fought for the oppressed but hated the oppressor. Strange, he thought, how he enjoyed thinking that God hated all the same people that he hated. He had the uneasy feeling that he had created God in his own image, and after his likeness. Through a series of encounters with unlikely "teachers," he admitted that he had subverted the indiscriminate love of God for all people without conditions, limits, or exceptions.

Campbell then had the temerity to act upon his newfound convictions. He started sipping whiskey with the Ku Klux Klan, and became something like their unofficial chaplain who officiated at their weddings and funerals. He visited MLK's assassin James Earl Ray in prison. There was a big difference, he realized, between being a "strict social activist" and a follower of Jesus. The key? "I came to understand the nature of tragedy. And one who understands the nature of tragedy can never take sides."

Then there was the German Lutheran pastor Martin Niemoller who started at the opposite side of the political spectrum and traveled to a similar theological destination

like Campbell. He is best known for his famous poetic confession "First They Came" and ends with "Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak for me." By his own admissions, for much of his life, speaking out for the powerless, resisting Hitler, and defending the Jews is exactly what he didn't do. He was a deeply conservative right wing nationalist who voted for Hitler and the Nazi Party twice. Even when he was imprisoned, in 1937 by the Nazi government at Dachau for opposing some Nazi policies he volunteered to rejoin the German military in World War II.

In 1945 Niemöller took his wife back to Dachau to show her the cell where he had been imprisoned. There they saw a simple plaque that read, "Here in the years 1933 to 1945, 238,756 people were cremated." This was a wakeup call for Niemöller as he realized that Dachau had opened in 1933 when he still was a pastor of a large church who supported the Nazi regime. He said, "My alibi accounted for the years 1937 to 1945," he said, "but God was not asking me where I had been in those years but from 1933 to 1945... and for those [earlier years] I did not have an answer."

Eventually Niemöller radically changed. He repudiated his ultra-nationalist and antisemitic views. He admitted his personal responsibility for not resisting more, along with the collective guilt of the entire nation for the Holocaust. Sounding like Will Campbell, he confessed that "it took me a long time to learn that God is not the enemy of my enemies." In the words of the epistle James, we can't play favorites with the love of God.

Which brings me to the Gospel lesson this morning of Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician woman and healing the deaf man. All too often we have this image in our heads of a perfect Jesus who does no wrong and we forget that Jesus was very human. Even though Jesus is spreading God's good news to the Jews even he has to have his mind opened to how radically the good news really is.

Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician woman shows what it means to grow as a child of God. This woman stretches Jesus' understanding into a deeper, truer, and fuller comprehension of God's love. It is Jesus himself who has to have his eyes opened and his ears unstopped. Jesus has to face his own blind spots, rudeness, even prejudice, and allow himself to "be opened" to the full and uncomfortable implications of God's love.

So the Syrophenician woman schools him by turning his slur of being called a dog right back at his insults when she says, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." It's a brilliant response because it cuts to the very heart of Jesus' boundary-breaking, taboo-busting, division-destroying ministry of table fellowship. He's the one who eats with tax collectors and prostitutes and breaks bread with sinners. His disciples are the ones who earn the Pharisees' contempt for eating with unwashed hands. The table is where Jesus shows the world who God is.

And so the table is precisely where this outsider, this Gentile, this outcast, this woman calls him out by asking, "Lord, where's my Good News? Where's my place at the table? If you are who you say you are, how can you be content while anyone goes hungry in the vicinity of your table? She is asking Jesus to expand the circle, widen the table and dissolve even more boundaries.

As an interesting aside, nowhere else in the gospels does Jesus lose a verbal contest except to this audacious female foreigner who schools and challenges him to break down his own prejudicial barriers. In many respects she teaches him compassion

and by doing so Jesus changes and recognizes he must adopt an attitude of inclusion for everyone. Barbara Brown Taylor describes the moment this way: "You can almost hear the huge wheel of history turning as Jesus comes to a new understanding of who he is and what he has been called to do." The Syrophenician woman's faith and persistence teach him that God's purpose for him "is bigger than he had imagined, that there is enough of him to go around."

Then he encounters the deaf man and there is irony with this healing. As Jesus places his fingers in the mans ears and says be opened it's almost as if he is saying to God, okay, I get it. I'm listening. I'm working on being open to your all encompassing love and inclusion.

What would it be like to follow in the footsteps of a Jesus who listens to the urgent challenge of the other? What would it be like to stop limiting who we will be for other people, and who we will let them be for us? What would it be like to insist on good news for people who don't look, speak, behave, or worship like we do?

Now more than ever we need to be open to Gods' all encompassing love which can come through the wisdom of people who are nothing like us. We need to be opened and listen to the voice of God speaking from places we might consider unholy. More than ever we need to be opened to the Good News that stretches our capacity to love which helps us widen the table for all God's children. Finally let us be opened to the truth that God isn't done with us and there is so much more we need to learn and do. It's a constant ongoing liberating process to be opened to God's amazing love. May we always open our ears, our hearts and minds to embrace God's love. Let it be so. Amen.