

SERMON NOTES FOR AUGUST 25, 2019

(Jeremiah 1:4-10, Psalm 71: 1-6, Hebrews 12: 18-19, Luke 13:10-17)

In the late 1950's there was a pandemic of the Asiatic Flu. One family had three children who contracted this flu and then it became meningitis B. They were ages 5, 7 and 11. The 11 yr. old died within 24 hours. The 5 and 7 yr. olds were put into the hospital. The 5 yr. old stayed a few weeks and was released, but the 7 yr. developed complications - an infection around her heart and paralysis of her legs. After a month, the doctors recommended the parents find a home for the child for paraplegics.

This child was receiving penicillin shots three times each day. They were painful and the child cried when the nurses came to administer them. One day a nurse told her that if she prayed the Lord's Prayer before getting the shot, it wouldn't hurt. The girl responded that she didn't know it, so the nurse taught her. As weeks followed the girl recognized that when she prayed the prayer the shots didn't hurt, but when she forgot, they did.

The feeling returned to her legs. She had to learn to walk again but after a couple more months she was back to school and totally healed. Her mother told her that God had special plans for her and began to take her to church where she began to receive Holy Communion. This became the center of her faith.

That little girl was me- Now, did I think that prayer was magic? Yes, as a 7 yr. old. As an adult I realize the answer is "no." But, what this experience taught me was that I mattered to God.

"Before you were in the womb I knew you and before you were born I consecrated you." Even today these words make me stop and ponder. They challenge me.

The reason they challenge me is that these words suggest that I matter to God. I was in my teens when I first really "heard" them. At that time in my life I didn't believe I really mattered at all. But, in this passage I'm given a different message. How could I have forgotten between age 7 and into my teen years that I mattered to God?

I wonder how many people struggle with believing that they matter, - to God, or anyone. I wonder if you struggle to realize that you matter.

Even our Psalm for today instructs that God is our refuge and our hope - the one who will rescue us. Who needs to be rescued today?

In our Gospel this week, Luke shares a story known as "The Bent-Over Woman."

We should note that the story doesn't focus on this woman, but rather on the priests who judge Jesus' actions. The woman isn't named, nor is it pointed out that she shouldn't be there.

However, I want to focus on *her*.

We can learn a lot about her just from these seven short verses.

Jesus is teaching in a synagogue. The best archaeologists can determine, synagogues during Jesus' time were public buildings with side benches. It was where teaching on the Torah took place in the local communities.

You didn't have to be a rabbi to read from the Torah or to speak in the synagogue. BUT, you did have to be a circumcised male. And to attend, according to the purity laws, you did have to be clean.

However, here we have a *woman*, one who is bent over and unable to stand straight. The story states that she has an unclean spirit within her who controls her and doesn't allow her to stand erect. She's had this spirit for eighteen years. Yet here she is – at the door of the synagogue with her crippled self!

Now, this is a woman who must have believed that she mattered! She had the courage to come to the outskirts of the synagogue seeking to hear Jesus.

Whatever her plan was, we can conclude that she's a woman with hutzpah – willing to risk being struck, yelled at or turned away.

We're not told that she was looking for healing. Perhaps she was just curious about Jesus. But, Jesus recognized her need. He saw her condition and his heart was moved to action. He knew that she mattered to God, therefore she mattered to him. So he called her to him and healed her.

I believe that even today Jesus recognizes our needs and knows that we matter to God so he calls us to him – by calling us to the table. Jesus reaches out to all of us through this table. "Come!"

Theologian, N.T. Wright says, "When Jesus wanted to fully explain what his forthcoming death was all about, he didn't give a theory. He didn't even give them a set of scripture texts. He gave them a meal." Jesus continually offered a meal to people. He showed people that they mattered by offering them a meal.

So the question becomes: Do you need this meal? Who do you know that needs this meal? Who do you know who is bent over, wounded, ill (whether spiritually or physically)? Who is Jesus reaching out to? Who needs to know that they matter?

In North Carolina in the 1940's a young black woman joined the Episcopal Church. She then invited a young black man to attend church with her. He sat in the pews when it was time for communion. He watched the white folk receiving communion –the bread and wine from the chalice. He thought “we're the only black people here today.”

He stayed in the pew while his girlfriend went forward to the altar rail. He watched his girlfriend receive the bread and then the priest lowered the chalice to her lips saying, “The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life.”

The man was astonished! He had never seen black and whites drink from the same water fountain let alone the same chalice. He decided that any church where black and white drank from the same cup had discovered something powerful, something he wanted to be a part of.

That young couple were the parents of our current Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry. Mr. Curry recognized that day that he mattered to God and because he did, he mattered to that congregation.

When we reach out to people to join us at this meal, they don't have to think like us, believe like us or look like us. They just need to be needy like us and hungry for what Jesus reaches out to give us. At this table we are all the same – the people who matter to God. The Body of Christ.

St. Augustine said that when we receive communion we should “Receive who you are and become what you receive.” In other words you, we, are the Body of Christ and we should reach out to others – all people - as the Body of Christ.

Before Don was received as priest in the Episcopal Church we attended a church in Snellville, Georgia.

On one Sunday in particular I remember that at the end of the Communion time, a young child of about seven years old suddenly ran down the aisle to the altar rail. She must have gone out to use the bathroom and she just returned in time to receive communion. She ran down the aisle fearing that she wouldn't get there in time to receive communion. It drew the attention of everyone in the church. Once she had received, she turned with a huge smile on her face and skipped all the way up the aisle!

Today I challenge you that when you come to this communion table that you receive who you are and to return to your pew with that exuberance. And when you leave the church today maintain that exuberance to become who you are – be the Body of Christ, through every tweet, text, email, Facebook post or conversation, to every person you encounter this week. Because they matter to God, therefore they should matter to us. Amen.

