

Deadly old racial and religious hatreds are baring their fangs, and the resulting tensions are making headlines again. Once again, our creativity and imagination are being tested in the search for mutual respect. In a message last Thursday, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry reminded the church that it was times like this when Dr. Martin Luther King wrote his last book titled, “Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?”

It’s no coincidence that our readings this morning each reveal some aspect of God’s passionate yearning to create the Beloved Community in the human family and in all of creation. But this passage from Matthew may be the most poignantly instructive.

A Canaanite woman shouts, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David.”

Matthew’s Jesus has come from Nazareth, where his family, friends and religious leaders took offense at his teaching and questioned his authority. He has still not had time alone to grieve the murder of his cousin, John the Baptizer.

He fed a crowd of 5,000, and gave Peter and the disciples a lesson about walking on water during storms. All but spent, Jesus has retreated to the Galilean back-country of what is now southern Lebanon; Gentile districts that were actively oppressing the Jews economically and politically. And people just keep coming even though no one seems to really understand who he is.

One of them, a local Canaanite woman shouts: “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David.” She is an upper-class, Herod-worshipping woman breaking multiple cultural taboos in approaching him. Jesus ignores her. He is not obliged to respond. He is a Jew, she is a Gentile. According to cultural norms, they are not equals, and this game of challenge and response is reserved for equals.

She is insistent and assertive, but she is also insightful and astute. She calls him both by the title that the Israelites are reluctant to use and by the name of his Jewish lineage. The uncomfortable disciples think the Canaanite woman is a problem. So, following their cultural instincts, they urge Jesus to send her away.

And in a deeply human moment, an exhausted and distracted Jesus reminds them of his vocation. “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house

of Israel.” Now, remember, when Matthew’s Jesus sent the twelve out into the world, he told them that *they* were to go *nowhere* among the Gentiles and Samaritans, but go rather “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

He is not, as Bishop Tom Wright has pointed out, some kind of traveling doctor whose task is to heal everyone he encounters. As far as Jesus is concerned, his vocation is clear and specific: He is here to show God’s people, Israel, that God is finally fulfilling the promise to bring the realm of heaven to earth.

Up to this point, Matthew’s Jesus has focused exclusively on Israel. He and his followers are trying to be loyal to God’s purpose. For Jesus to fulfill the teachings of Torah and bring new life to the world through the Jewish people – God’s chosen people – then Israel *must* receive the message first. Launching an indiscriminating mission to the entire world would risk disputing God’s purpose in choosing the children of Israel to show the world how to be in relationship with God.

This is a remarkable moment in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. God catches him by surprise. The future realm of heaven is truly breaking into the present in ways that Matthew’s Jesus has seen only once before. He was surprised and impressed by the faith of the Gentile centurion who asked Jesus to heal centurion’s beloved servant.

But what opens Jesus’ eyes and *changes* him is the faith of the worried mother of a sick daughter. She drops the reference to his Jewish particularity and appeals to his universal role as the Messiah. “Lord,” she says from her knees, “help me.”

What happens next has troubled preachers, theologians and scholars for centuries. We have tried to rehabilitate or domesticate this moment: “He was being ironic.” “He was testing her faith.” “He was calling attention to the disciples’ own prejudices.” Maybe.

But no matter how we twist and squirm, there’s no denying that Jesus insulted the Canaanite woman. And harshly. “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

Now, first century Gentiles allowed dogs in their houses and could feed them from the table. Jews did not allow dogs into the house. Their dogs were service animals, but never pets. Job referred to “the dogs of my flock,” but they were only about half domesticated and if they were provoked, they could be vicious.

So, in Jesus' Jewish mind, to feed these unruly beasts meant taking bread from the table *inside* the house, carrying it to the door and tossing it *outside*. Jesus has defined the Canaanite as an outsider.

And then came a gorgeous teaching moment.

From the depths of her vulnerability, the woman's voice carries God's truth to the ears and heart of Jesus. Her words break open and release the Son of David to allow the true Messiah to emerge. "Yes, Lord," she says, now naming *only* his more inclusive identity, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

She *is* in his house, do you see? She is *already* at his table. As Jesus awakens to the fullness of his identity as the Messiah, he sees *her* as *she* truly is. And then Jesus welcomes her into his family as a sister; one who trusts and acts on the yearning of God.

The English version we heard this morning leaves one tiny syllable out of the Greek text. Jesus says not simply, "Woman, great is your faith," but "O, woman..." as if to capture the very moment of revelation; the instant of his awakening.

Through the "great faith" of this Canaanite woman, God illuminated Jesus, the Jewish son of David, as the Christ, the Son of God and the Messiah of all creation. Her vulnerable perseverance shocked him into seeing his true Divinity and simultaneously allowed him to look beyond her surfaces to see her true humanity. "O, *woman*..."

Now, Matthew's Jesus always responds immediately when he hears God's voice, whether God speaks through the skies, through the earth or through the resourceful and resilient mother of a sick daughter. Once awakened, God's mercy flows freely through him. Momentarily blocked by an over-identification with one race, one religion, one perspective, now a flood of compassion opens immediately, fully and forever.

Jesus says, "Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter is healed instantly.

This story is at the heart of Matthew's Gospel because it displays the essence of God's grace working to gather all God's people into the Blessed Community; reaching out to embrace outsider and outcast and everyone who cries out, "God, help me."

That saving grace is available to us and through us to bring unity, forgiveness and healing. If we consent to be used, God's grace will override

prejudices, surpass expectations and bring harmony to even the most divisive situations.

The reason God revealed Godself fully in Jesus Christ was to *be like* us so that we could learn how to be in relationship with God and with each other. The flow of grace is blocked when we imagine God is *only* like us – that is to say, when we imagine God is *not* like others.

Waking up to our role as vessels of grace for God’s Beloved Community is the first step on the path of sainthood. Growing up as children of God in the Beloved Community involves including all our cultural, racial and religious differences, but transcending these so that we can nurture and protect each other’s humanity with unconditional loving regard.

And every time we gather at the Eucharistic table as God’s holy children, we can begin cleaning up the obstacles we have created for others or for ourselves. We start by noticing and naming the limitations we are clinging to; truthfully confessing the pain we cause by our own misguided actions or thoughtlessness. God meets us in those actions to nurture the forgiving and forgiveness-seeking nature God has already planted within us.

Renewed, we go out to show up on behalf of God’s Beloved Community.

So, take your place at God’s table and eat the bread of heaven. Trust God’s loving mercy to drive out demons of hate and division. Drink from the cup of reconciliation, and trust it to make you whole with God and with the humanity of all those you encounter this week.

That’s how we unblock the flow of God’s mercy. With our prayers and actions, God will pour inspired divinity through us for all our brothers and sisters in ways beyond our imagining.

“Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David.”

Works consulted:

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The sequence of “waking up, growing up, cleaning up and showing up” comes from a personal email from Ken Wilber from January 2017.