

Genesis 45:1-15

Matthew 15:10-28

The mission statement of Morgan Park Presbyterian Church says that we are “Committed to Christ, Diversity, and Mission. Preparing people for a relationship with God, one another, and the community. Encountering the Word through scripture, worship and fellowship.”

What if someone visited us today and discovered that they did not fit into the mission that we have set before ourselves as a church? What if that person demanded to be part of our community - first out of seeming stubborn anger and then out of helpless need?

---What would we do? Politely cast them out? Half heartedly invite them in, knowing we will never change? Or perhaps wonder allowed, “what motivates your demands? How could you feel excluded? How can we learn from you?”---

Jesus, too, lays out the mission for his ministry with the disciples in Matthew Chapter 10:5-7, saying, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’”

Today we learn what happened when one woman’s faith was able to open Jesus up to a broader social context. This woman, a Canaanite outside the parameters of Jesus’ mission to the Jews, goes from social outcast to treasured teacher in one short encounter.

Last week, we followed Jesus and his disciples as they quickly traveled by boat to the land of Gennesaret after hearing of the execution of John the Baptist. When they arrive in Gennesaret and begin healing the sick, religious authorities from Jerusalem arrive to question Jesus about his cleanliness - for they did not wash their hands before eating.

While I fully support Jesus message here, I also want to maintain that I do wash my hands regularly - including before I eat - and I think Jesus would wash his hands too if he were living in our modern society.

The Pharisees’ question extends from a desire to maintain tradition and through tradition, maintain order. Jesus presents a threat to this order. Their question is more specifically, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.”

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Jesus responds by providing a new mission for the religious establishment. Instead of making life decisions solely on following the traditions of the elders to maintain the existing system, Jesus reflects on his actions - developing behaviors based in scripture and based in a mission to provide grace and healing to the lost sheep of Israel.

Jesus shares his wisdom that what comes out of our mouths is what defiles us, not what we put in it - because what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and the heart can harbor many sinful desires. So instead of maintaining cleanliness by ritually washing his hands, Jesus teaches that spiritual cleanliness is maintained by developing a clean heart - Washing away the evil intentions that can dwell within us - both known and unknown - to work toward a heart ruled by love, inspiring words and actions of love as well.

This reflective work of being ruled by love is put to the test, for the very next encounter that Jesus has is with a woman with whom he exchanges defiling words. When the Canaanite woman pleads for healing for her daughter, Jesus responds by saying, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."
"It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

What could make Jesus use such defiling words with anyone in such a vulnerable position? Jae Won Lee describes this contextual encounter this way: "Differences of ethnicity, heritage, religion and gender separate her from Judean social norms." As a woman, this mother is expected "to be reserved in public. When she not only takes the initiative but also shouts her demand at Jesus, she violates social norms," saying, "*Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.*" Lee believes this would have been considered a "Social affront" that "did not merit consideration, so Jesus seems to be playing by the social rules of his time when he does not even respond to her."

---What might you consider a "social affront" to you today? Who do you choose to listen to? Who can you ignore? Who does our society say you should ignore? A needy friend? A demanding stranger? Your own inner voice?---

When Jesus declares, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." the woman responds by identifying with the lowly dog and demanding even what little respect and care is due to them.

"Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

I am a human. I exist too. I am worthy of love. My daughter is as worthy of life as any other. On her knees below Jesus, the Canaanite woman calls out the social brokenness that has separated her from Jesus' healing touch. She names the boundaries that defile the heart.

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The faith of the Canaanite woman transformed Jesus and his ministry in that moment: "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

As Jesus travels further and further from the center of the Roman occupied Palestinian territory, he encounters more and more people who do not fit into his original mission to the "lost sheep of Israel." This woman, a Canaanite, descended from the original occupants of the promised land that had been taken by force by Jesus' ancestors, was not supposed to be included in Jesus' healing ministry to bring the kingdom of God to the people. However, this unnamed Canaanite woman believed in Jesus, his message, and his healing power anyway. Out of the great love that she had nurtured in her heart for her daughter, she spoke the most humbling words in response to Jesus' dismissal. In those humble words was a strong demand to be included.

What was transformed in Jesus in that moment? Through persistence and surprising humility, the Canaanite woman is able to demonstrate to Jesus that she can have the same faith as those within his mission. Jesus was able to recognize that this challenging encounter revealed a defiling societal boundary present in his community that had limited the scope of his mission on earth.

As an organizer and student with the Chicago ROAR antiracism organization, I have had many experiences of discovering how racism has embodied itself in me. I have expected to be respected. I have expected to have my voice heard. I have believed that my experience was representative of other's experiences. When those expectations are revealed as part of my socialization as a white male, I grieve, I deny, I get angry, but eventually I learn from it and seek to expand my perspective.

While race and racism did not exist in Jesus' time, communal prejudices were part of what kept people groups apart. Without going through a period of denial, self-hatred, or hopelessness, Jesus immediately responds to this woman by exclaiming, "Great is your faith." and expanding his heart beyond tending to the lost sheep of Israel to an inclusive vision of God's love and grace that included this woman and her daughter.

To Jesus, the first shall be last and the last shall be first. The teaching authorities visiting from Jerusalem needed to learn from Jesus, but the humbled mother with no authority on Jesus' ministry became an important teacher for our savior.

In our Genesis narrative today, the sons of Jacob also encounter a surprising and unexpected teacher. These brothers travel for weeks to reach Egypt in search of a compassionate king that might provide for them sustenance during their years-long drought. While they plead with their

powerful benefactor not to take their brother Benjamin, the only remaining child of Rachel, into slavery, the miracle of this chance encounter is revealed. Their powerful benefactor, who the brothers had been addressing as Lord and bowing before, is none other than their dreaming brother Joseph, whom they had attacked and sold into slavery themselves!

In an instant, they were reminded of their defiled hearts and the defiled words and actions that had extended from their hatred of their younger brother, Joseph. Their hatred pushed them to first plan his murder and then sell him into slavery. Their hatred led Joseph to live for years as a slave - dealing with abuse, prison, and violence.

Joseph's faith allows him to listen for God's voice in his dreams. Transforming his life and the lives of everyone he knew. With God's blessing, Joseph becomes the most powerful person in the kingdom of Egypt and saves the region from famine and destruction by interpreting the pharaoh's dreams.

Joseph's faith allows him to look beyond the sins of his brothers - the abuse and violence that had been their defining act of relationship toward him. Instead Joseph sees the blessings that followed. The blessings that followed his years of slavery, anxiety and suffering. Instead Joseph sees how God has called him into service - to be a source of physical salvation for countless lives, including his own. Instead of seeing his brother's defiled hearts, he sees the greater glory of God that has transformed his life and brought his dreams to fruition. Instead of seeing his brother's defiled hearts, he sees the anguish and pain of repentant hearts that know they have done wrong.

Joseph's faith allowed him to become the image of God's grace - undeserved by his defiled brothers. Joseph welcomes them in, crying openly, weeping over his reunion with his beloved family. Like God, Joseph's love for his brothers was stronger than the pain and anger of their separation.

Where his brothers had believed that the world had limited blessing, and Joseph's success would lead to some loss for themselves, Joseph had faith in God whose blessings were boundless - where love and nurture and life were abundant. Joseph's response to meeting his brothers - his attackers and slave traders - was to provide for them in abundance: food and land and protection and love and relationship in abundance. Joseph provides a way to make God's promise to Abraham possible where there was no way. Without Joseph's abundant grace, there would be no continued lineage of the family of Abraham that we follow in scripture. In the face of annihilation, Joseph chooses love.

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Joseph chooses love, and Joseph has the power to provide reconciliation. His brothers have true remorse for their defiling act of violence against Joseph, and his brothers no longer pose a threat to Joseph in a way that he could fall victim again. Like God, Joseph has the freedom to act on his desire for reconciliation in part because his position of power frees him from the dangers of relationship.

While we hope for reconciliation in our relationships, there are some words and actions that defile us in ways that are difficult to mend. In some abusive relationships, reconciliation may never be possible. Instead of seeking reconciliation in these cases, we can seek forgiveness and seek to forgive. We can repent for our sins and seek God's grace. We can forgive those who have hurt us but continue to protect ourselves from abusive relationships. We can seek equal relationships where reconciliation is possible and hope that God will help us get there.

It is our faith in God and God's healing beloved community that empowers us to begin living out God's love and grace - even in our context of hate and separation. Langston Hughes captures this faith in his poem, "**I, Too.**"

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

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Who is still eating in the kitchen today? Who is still not allowed at the table, where their voice can be heard and relationship deepened? Is it you? Do you know them? Or are they still foreign to you, shouting demands at you on the street?

Let us carry with us the curious love of Jesus, for others and for ourselves, so that when we hear a cry for healing we might respond with inclusive love.

Let us carry with us the grace of Joseph, for others and for ourselves, so that when we are confronted by defiled hearts we might respond with abundant hospitality - nurturing life for the most vulnerable.

Let us have faith, like the Canaanite woman, that God's kingdom is already here and we are invited to the table.

Amen.