

Did you hear the psalmist say these words, “Let the nations be glad and sing for joy”? Yet, with the reality of Charlottesville in our own nation and of Barcelona and Cambrils in Spain, it’s hard to imagine nations being glad and singing for joy.

But as this psalm was read, I wonder if you noticed the reason for gladness and joy? The psalmist calls the people to gladness and joy because God judges the people with equity. God’s equity means that those who have been pushed down are lifted up, those who have been silenced are given voice. God’s equity means the playing field is leveled and everyone receives what is needed for them to thrive and be whole.

This weekend in cities across our country “free speech” rallies were held, with counter protestors amassing. In one such city, Boston Mayor Marty Walsh commented, “There have been questions about why we granted a permit for the rally.” He continued saying, “The courts have made it abundantly clear. People have the right to gather, no matter how repugnant their views are. They have the right to free speech. But they don’t have the right to create unsafe conditions.”

In light of our nation and our world, I hear another psalmist cry out, “How long, O Lord?” How long until we see in each other your divine image and respond with gladness and joy rather than with fear and hate? How long, O Lord?

As we turn to our Gospel lesson for today, especially in light of the emboldened language of hate we have experienced in this nation, I want to warn you that you will hear something you would rather not hear today. You will hear words that you wish Jesus had not said. In this text, Jesus ignores a plea for help from a desperate mother and then proceeds to use 1st century vernacular, which will register as offensive to our ears. Forewarned, listen now for God’s word to us through the Gospel of Matthew (15:10-28):

Context, context, context. When we tackle any portion of scripture, it is always necessary to see a particular passage as part of a greater whole. We have to remember that Matthew’s audience consists primarily of 1st Century Palestinian Jews steeped in a culture of exclusivity. The Jews were God’s chosen people. The Jews were a small segment of a much larger population living under the oppressive rule of the Roman Empire. Their ancestral temple in Jerusalem had already been destroyed and rebuilt once and they lived in fear of Rome. As a small religious community, they were preoccupied with what would defile and hurt the body, whether they would be clean or unclean and able to worship or not. The Pharisees and the scribes were the keepers of their religious laws. The Jews were exclusive, yet marginalized people in 1st century Palestine. This is the context of our passage.

We enter chapter 15 at verse 10, but what precedes our passage is important, for it begins with the keepers of the Jewish law asking Jesus this question, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders, for they do not wash their hands before they eat?”

The question sounds innocuous, but Jesus’ answer does not. He calls the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites. He then makes it clear that it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles, whether it’s dirt from unwashed hands or foods that are on the do-not-eat list. What defiles is what comes out of the mouth, says Jesus, because the mouth proceeds from the condition of the heart.

It would have been very helpful to just stop at this point in the reading this morning given our national and world stage, and spend our time talking about the condition of our

hearts. As the condition of our hearts, all of our hearts whether one considers him or herself on the left or the right or someone in between, is what is at stake in our nation. Are our hearts steeped in hate or love? Are our hearts set on inclusion or exclusion? Are our hearts set on building community or dividing community? Are our hearts broken open to the pain and suffering of all people not just some people? Are our hearts hardened or still pliable? What is the condition of your heart this morning; for Jesus says this is the source of what comes out of the mouth.

I don't know how much of the unfolding information available about Charlottesville you have digested, but I watched a very disturbing 22-minute video by a news organization that had a front row seat to the march and counter protest. I also have read first-hand accounts of those who were there, such as: Brian McLaren, prominent Christian pastor, author, activist and speaker; and Jill Duffield, the Editor of the Presbyterian Outlook. One image (among many) was most disturbing simply because of the age of the participant. It was a young boy, maybe around ten years old, and he spewed hate filled verbiage as he walked with all right marchers.

"No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate," said Nelson Mandela. That ten-year-old boy was not born hating, he had learned hate from adults in his life. But, Mandela doesn't settle for hate, for he says, "If people can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite."

"What comes out of the mouth is what defiles, because it proceeds from the heart." This is why what Jesus said to the Canaanite woman in our text this morning is so disturbing. Context though is important again. Jesus went to the region of Tyre and Sidon, the region of Gentiles. Jesus and the disciples were going to encounter the others, those who are not Jews, simply because of their chosen route. It really shouldn't surprise Jesus or the disciples that someone asks for healing, as news of Jesus' healing ministry had spread far and wide by this point in the gospel.

The Canaanite woman cries out to Jesus and his disciples with respect, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David." Jesus did not answer her plea. He just kept walking. But the woman is persistent. She calls out, which is bold enough in a public setting for a 1st century woman, and when the disciples try to get Jesus to dismiss her, Jesus makes it clear that his mission is to the lost sheep of Israel and no one else.

You have heard it said that, "Sometimes you have to say, 'no' to a good thing in order to do a better thing." This is what we could hear Jesus saying, "I know my mission, I have to stay focused." But, the woman persists. She falls to her knees before Jesus and pleads yet again, "Lord, help me."

But, then Jesus opens his mouth. Did Jesus just call her and her people dogs? Silence is his most civil response, but then Jesus opened his mouth! "What comes out of the mouth is what defiles, because it proceeds from the heart."

Context, context, context. "Referring to Canaanites as dogs was a familiar and favorite insult of the Israelites," writes commentator Dock Hollingsworth. He continues saying, "Calling a woman a female dog had the same tone, as if it were shouted today in a high-school hallway."

These are not the words we expect from the lips of Jesus. He used the vernacular, the learned hate of his culture, which effectively belittled and put the Canaanite woman in her

place. What's disturbing is that the hearers of this first message would not have been shocked by Jesus' words. The language was just too common.

I wonder what words and phrases we are not shocked by today? What words and phrases have we grown accustomed to in our culture that demean or belittle others, so that we no longer hear them as insults?

I'm not excusing Jesus, but we, too, miss what are called micro-aggressions in the context of our daily lives... one I am used to hearing in the sports context... "you hit, run, etc., like a girl." It is most often said to a male suggesting his performance is not good enough. When did being a girl become a bad thing? Or how about when a person from the majority white culture asks anyone of color, "Where do you come from?" suggesting automatically that they are not from America. My sons' best friends growing up were of Mexican ancestry and they were constantly asked, "Where are you from?" Their family ancestors have been American citizens longer than my family ancestors have been American citizens. Their friends didn't speak Spanish either, although most would assume they should be able to! What slang words or phrases are part of our vernacular vocabulary that demean even if we don't realize it?

Karl Barth's famous words, "Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both," are in full effect with this passage from Matthew. The first hearers of this message would not have been shocked by Jesus' words. But, we should be, given the rhetoric we heard and read about in Charlottesville from the alt-right, the KKK, Neo-Nazi, and other white supremacists. We must be very clear that what Jesus said in 1st Century Palestine would never be acceptable today. Although Jesus' words didn't shock his audience, we know them to be offensive today. The Canaanite woman was not a dog. Her people were not dogs. We must never, ever animalize or otherwise denigrate another human being, for we are all created in the image of God.

"What comes out of the mouth is what defiles, because it proceeds from the heart." I have to admit I don't know where Jesus' heart was on that given day, but I do know it wasn't completely closed off and hardened to the Gentile region he was traveling through, because our text doesn't stop with his insult. It continues.

The pleading mother doesn't give up. She stands up to the insult and speaks her mind with respect saying, "Yes, Lord... yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the masters' table." Every time the Canaanite woman addresses Jesus, she acknowledges him as Lord. "Have mercy on me, Lord... Lord, help me...Yes, Lord." She persistently engages without demeaning. She persistently engages the one who can bring healing to her daughter with dignity and respect. She is even able to take the derogatory statement that Jesus made and turn it into a hope filled illustration. If only we had such wisdom, when we are insulted by others.

In reading the accounts of Charlottesville, of Boston just yesterday, and of the marchers and counter protestors planned in Laguna Beach today, we need wisdom. We need wisdom born of the Spirit which can stand up to insults, slander, hate and even violence, with dignity. The Canaanite woman did not throw rocks or bottles of urine at Jesus and the disciples to support her good cause. She did not come dressed in camo and armed with firepower in order to make her point. She simply, yet persistently with dignity and respect approached the one who could heal her daughter.

The miracle of this text is that a marginalized 1st century woman takes the initiative to encounter Jesus and when she does her persistence finds the condition of Jesus' heart malleable, for he said to her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

As we read the newspaper in one hand and the bible in the other, it is clear that we need the Canaanite woman's wisdom, born of the Spirit, in our time and place in history. In the midst of the rhetoric of hate escalating literally around the globe, we need to persistently speak up and out, as we did this past Thursday evening in this sanctuary, for love and unity across our ethnic, socioeconomic, religious and gender differences, all the while humbly accessing the condition of our own hearts.

Remember Jesus' caution to the scribes and the Pharisees, good church people, "What comes out of the mouth is what defiles, because it proceeds from the heart." May our hearts be deeply rooted in God's love, mercy and compassion. May our hearts always be malleable, open to learning from anyone who is being marginalized by the rhetoric of hate in our own nation. May we have the courage of the Canaanite woman, who risked violating social norms and cultural boundaries to promote healing.

Let's not ignore the cries of the marginalized. Let's not settle for the way things are. Let's participate in the difficult work of healing our communities, our nation and our world one, so that as that psalmist said, "All may be glad and sing for joy." Amen.