

Genesis 45:9-15

Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, “Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.” And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.” Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Matthew 15:10-28

Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” Then the disciples approached and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?” He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if on blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.” But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.” Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

Prayer: O God, may our eyes be opened to see a bigger picture, may we find the way to peace and justice, and may our hearts be continually opened by the gift of Your Grace and Love. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Foreigners, Outcasts, Peace and Equanimity

In the ongoing work to create a just and peaceful world, the world that Jesus envisioned, the world he called “The Kingdom of Heaven,” I think there is a quality of mind that will serve us well, that will sustain us, help us to see the bigger picture, and help us to make our hearts peaceful, even in the midst of difficulty and struggle. This is the quality of equanimity.

Equanimity, mental calmness, happens when we have insight into the truth of impermanence.

When we realize the truth that life is always changing, and we accept this truth about life, there is a peace and calmness that comes to us. This is equanimity.

I am noticing that the older I get, the more my memories of the past seem like dreams, mirages, fading back into the distance, like images seen through fog, or mist. The edges begin to fray, the clarity softens. The events of today arise and then pass away. They fade into memory, and then are gone. And everything is like this. Life is constantly changing, and this is truth of impermanence. To make peace with this truth is to find equanimity.

If there is any good that might come from the Covid19 pandemic, it might be this: that we realize the impermanence of life, that all things arise and pass away, and that each moment we are alive, and each breath we take, is a gift that is given to us, for which we can be grateful. And this gratefulness will settle deeply in our hearts, and we will find peace and equanimity.

Our Scripture readings this morning have much to say about inclusion and exclusion, foreigners and outcasts, and the vision and mission of Jesus to form an alternative community, the Kingdom of Heaven, an alternative to the political and economic oppression of the Roman Empire, and an alternative to the religious elitism occurring in the Jerusalem synagogue. Jesus is both a contemplative and a revolutionary. In his public teaching, he envisions a society which inverts the established dominance hierarchy, a society in which the first shall be last and the last shall be first. And Jesus balances and sustains his busy public teaching life with periodic retreats into the mountains and deserts where he seeks solitude and silence in meditation and prayer. I think his contemplative practice, his quiet time away from his disciples and the crowds, allows Jesus to maintain a larger perspective, to see a bigger picture, and rest in mental calmness and equanimity.

Jesus understands the human need for community, and throughout the gospels, the overarching themes of his ministry are inclusiveness, acceptance, and forgiveness. We find these themes echoing and resonating throughout the Old Testament as well. This morning, our lectionary reading pairs Genesis 45 with two scenes in Matthew 15. In Genesis 45, Joseph, as governor in Egypt, joyfully reunites with his brothers and saves them from starvation. In this story, the lines defining foreigners and outcasts are blurred. Generally speaking, people are often labelled and defined as foreigners and outcasts, but these labels are relative, dependent on their context. In other words, the definitions of foreigner and outcast can shift and change, depending on who is at center, establishing the normative position. Dominance hierarchies are defined and controlled by the dominant group. Currently, in our world, we are seeing a trending movement toward increasingly repressive regimes; governments that use power and propaganda, to define and suppress subordinate groups, those who are labelled foreigners, outsiders, and outcasts. The societal mechanisms that create foreigners and outcasts have not really changed since the times of ancient empires.

Joseph is an outcast. His brothers hated him, betrayed him, and sold him into slavery in a foreign country. And yet, many years later, these same brothers come to Egypt seeking help. Now foreigners themselves, they want to buy grain from the governor, who is, unbeknownst to them, their long lost, outcast brother. The same brother they hated and betrayed. But Joseph sees a bigger picture. Time has a way of changing everything. And Joseph, once the betrayed outcast, eventually becomes the savior-hero. This is a familiar theme in the Christian story.

The Joseph story creates a place for us to ask, “What is a foreigner? What is an outcast? What is an enemy?” According to some cultural theorists,^{1 2}we *create* the concept of foreigners, outcasts, and enemies in the process of forming our own identities. In other words, we need to have enemies because they help us to define who we are by defining *who we are not*.³ I think that when Jesus said “love your enemies,” this was a profound psychological insight. For who are our enemies but the projections of our own shadow? We create our enemies when we project that which we find repulsive in ourselves. This means that, conversely, when we love our enemies, we love and accept ourselves. Perhaps this is why loving our enemies is so difficult.

Matthew 15

In the Gospel reading from Matthew 15, we have two sections of text. The first is an argument between Jesus and the Pharisees, and the second is Jesus’ strange and difficult

¹ John Powell and Stephen Menendian, “The Problem of Othering: Inclusiveness and Belonging,” *Othering and Belonging, Expanding the Circle of Human Concern*, Issue 1, Summer 2016
<http://www.otheringandbelonging.org/the-problem-of-othering/> accessed October 8, 2019.

² Joffe, Helene, (2011). [Othering of people and phenomena](#). In D. J. Christie (Ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of Peace Psychology*. Blackwell-Wiley. Psychology professor Helene Joffe describes the role played by othering in the “formation of people's identities and in their responses to mass threats.” She writes, “Cultural theory, most notably that of the modernist theorist Edward Said, utilizes the notion of othering to explain Western ways of subordinating certain peoples and thereby constructing superior identities. Drawing on psychoanalytic and social psychological theories, Joffe demonstrates that the process by which people buttress their own sense of identity by locating undesirable qualities in others is not necessarily culture specific. Such processes lie at the root of identity formation.”

³ Neel Burton, “The Psychology of Scapegoating,” *Psychology Today*,
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hide-and-peek/201312/the-psychology-scapegoating> accessed October 30, 2019. In an article titled “The Psychology of Scapegoating,” psychiatrist Neel Burton writes “The ego defense of displacement plays an important role in scapegoating, in which uncomfortable feelings such as anger, frustration, envy, guilt, shame, and insecurity are displaced or redirected onto another, often more vulnerable, person or group. The scapegoats—outsiders, immigrants, minorities, [and so called] 'deviants'—are then persecuted,” he writes, “enabling the scapegoaters to discharge and distract from their negative feelings, which are replaced or overtaken by a crude but consoling sense of affirmation and self-righteous indignation,” Burton writes.

conversation with the Canaanite woman. Both of these texts deal with issues of inclusion and exclusion; who belongs and who doesn't belong; who is an outcast, a foreigner, and who is not.

The Gospel of Matthew was probably written sometime between 80 and 85 AD for a particular community of Jesus' followers. They were Jewish, but they were in conflict with the synagogue, and they were being driven out of the synagogue by the scribes and Pharisees, the synagogue leaders, the religious elite. As one New Testament scholar describes it, in Matthew's gospel, "We are reading one side of the bitter separation of Matthew's group from the synagogue."⁴ Because of this rift, New Testament scholars believe that Matthew's gospel emphasizes Jesus' identity as the "Son of God," while portraying the Pharisees in an especially negative light. Matthew's gospel encourages and develops a new identity for the followers of Jesus, an identity that goes beyond their Jewish identity.

Knowing this, we can read the frequent debates between Jesus and the Pharisees as the Matthean community vying to establish its new values. The Gospel of Matthew is a text for a breakaway community asserting its new voice. In this breakaway text, the Pharisees are harshly criticized, and scholars point out that this was an accepted form of debate in the ancient world: that is, to exaggerate the negative qualities of the opposing side as a way of discrediting them.⁵ The exaggerated tone spills over into Jesus' own rhetoric, and we can recognize some humor and irony in his teaching methods; we can even see the beginnings of some outrageousness in his methods as he contrasts superficial ritual defilement with true defilement of the heart and mind. Recognizing Jesus as an unorthodox, unencumbered teacher, a teacher who does not hesitate to

⁴ Warren Carter, "Notes to Matthew 15," Walter Harrelson, ed., *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* (Nashville: Harper Collins Abington Press, 2003), 1773.

⁵ Carter, "Notes to Matthew 15," *New Interpreter's*, 1773.

use outrageous methods and examples to make a point, will help us understand the second section of the text.

After the debate with the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus travels with his disciples to the region of Tyre and Sidon. This change in setting is an additional point in the discussion about ritual purity. Jesus deliberately walks into a Gentile region, traditionally forbidden to Jews because Gentiles were considered unclean. And even though the disciples try to dissuade him, he engages in conversation with the Canaanite woman. This was unheard of. A respected Jewish teacher would never be seen talking to a Gentile woman. When the woman asks Jesus to heal her daughter, he delivers an ugly racial slur. What are we to make of this?

Now, strangely enough, four years ago today, almost exactly to the day, was my very first day in seminary, and during our orientation, we had a discussion about this very text: the notorious scene in which Jesus insults the Canaanite woman. I remember thinking, “Oh, I hope I never have to preach on *that* text!” And then, when I read the lectionary for today’s readings, at first my heart sank. Oh no! What a disaster! How am I ever going to say anything about that story? Does anyone really understand this? But I have found that sometimes the most challenging Scripture offers the most to think about. And this story has really been haunting me for the past couple weeks!

So here are my thoughts: Either Jesus was a horrible racist, misogynist bigot, or he was a brilliant teacher. I happen to think he was a brilliant teacher. In this scene, he is playing a role, showing his disciples a living example of racism and misogyny. He wants to shock them into recognizing exclusion, hatred, and enemy image. He wants to show them the logical conclusions of ritual purity, and how these exclusivist laws create otherness, foreigners, and outcasts. He is playing a role that is the antithesis of everything he has ever taught them. And the Canaanite

woman understands what he is doing. She sees through his irony and reveals her own brilliance by responding with what is essentially a declaration of her own faith.

In this scene in Matthew 15, Jesus uses an outrageous teaching method. In today's cancel culture, if someone were to make a statement like this, it would create a virtual storm of public shaming and outcry. But I think we can understand it as a teaching point. Jesus' ministry was a ministry of inclusion. Two thousand years ago, he preached a message that continues to resonate with us, today. Jesus spoke truth to power. He was an advocate for the poor and oppressed, the foreigner and outcast. He wanted his disciples to understand how racism and enemy image function in oppressive societies, and he presented an alternative view in his many teachings and examples. When he was overwhelmed, he went to the mountains to meditate and pray, seeking to know God's will.

We continue to follow in Jesus' steps. We continue to struggle for justice and peace. We seek inspiration and guidance in Scripture and in our community. And when we are overwhelmed in the midst of the struggle, we can follow the example Jesus gave us, finding time for quiet solitude, contemplation, and prayer; practices in which we can reflect on the teachings, finding time for gratitude, peace, and equanimity. May it be so. Amen? Amen.