

Jesus does seem to be having a bad day. All he wants is to get away by himself for a while, but stuff just keeps coming at him!

It's the same for some of you, of course. You've been hoping, trying to get out of town, away from the heat and humidity, but just haven't made it yet, or had to cut short your vacation. And it's the same for the President; he'd really like to get up to Martha's Vineyard this week, and maybe he will, but there are some sharp voices out there telling him he'd better skip the Vineyard this year and stay home to grapple with the economic woes of his people.

Jesus has been trying to get some down time for quite a while now. After Herod beheaded John the Baptist, Jesus withdrew across the Sea of Galilee to a deserted place by himself. (14:13) The crowds got there ahead of him; they were waiting on the shore when he landed. He had compassion on them and healed their sick. Then he fed the whole lot, with a little bread and a few fish, all 5,000 men, not to mention women and children.

That done, he sent the disciples across the sea in a boat and went up a mountain by himself to pray. But there was a storm; the disciples' boat was battered. Off he went. "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." And he rescued Peter as he sank beneath the waves. (14:22ff.)

When they got to land on the other side, everybody recognized him. The people brought their sick to him; he healed them all. (14:34-36)

Just now, at the beginning of today's chapter, Pharisees and scribes have come all the way up from Jerusalem to Galilee to lodge a complaint: *Why don't your disciples wash their hands properly before they eat?!* Not a complaint about their hygiene, but about a lack of ritual purity. These scribes and Pharisees teach that God's mercy and favor are restricted to those who follow a particular ritual hand washing, and other such traditions. This may strike us a foolish, but the traditions and belief were powerful. And, this kind of line-drawing is not unique to the Pharisees of first century Israel; just look around in our world today.

Jesus is exasperated. "*You hypocrites!*" *You're more concerned about your traditions than the word of God, which commands compassion. Isaiah was talking to you when he said, "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."* (15:1-9)

Now, here, he warns the crowd about them, right in front of them. Not a recommended practice for building better relationships. Jesus is getting very cranky. *They are nothing but blind guides headed toward a big hole; follow them and you'll fall in the pit with them.* But even the disciples don't quite get it. "Explain this parable to us," Peter asks.

We can picture Matthew's community, made up of both Jewish and Gentile Christians, mulling all this over as they sort and sift the time-honored Jewish traditions. *What still obtains for us? Why is it okay to jettison a ritual that was an important practice for giving glory to God?*

A new tradition is emerging: it's not what or how you eat but how you treat other people, how you speak to each other, that matters.

Jesus is even more intent now on getting away, some place where nobody will find him for a while. Ah—here's the border between Israel and the region of Tyre and Sidon! He crosses over, withdraws from the fray, into ancient Phoenecia. Never been here before. Never been outside Israel before, except for the flight into Egypt when he was a baby. These people are all Gentiles; no one will know him.

Sorry, Jesus. No rest for you, not even here. “Just then”—almost as if she's been waiting for him—a woman starts shouting. As much as calls him by name, uses his proper titles, “Lord, Son of David,” begs for mercy. Demands mercy?

This is alarming. A woman. In public. Shouting at a man, a stranger. It's unthinkable; intolerable.

Even worse, she's “a Canaanite,” Matthew specifies. Ancient enemies of Israel, original population of the whole region, of the land promised to Abraham. Think Palestinian woman, in a refugee camp in Gaza or the West Bank, screaming for mercy and healing from a passing rabbi.

Jesus does not answer her at all.

*Send her away*, the disciples urge. Unlike the time two weeks ago when they urged him to send away the hungry crowd, Jesus makes no show of compassion now. “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” he says.

Addressing the disciples, affirming their reaction? Addressing the woman? Beginning to be troubled by the ring of the disciples' words? (Oh, the things that come out of our mouths!) Trying in his own mind to draw a distinction between then, with the hungry crowd, and now, with a Canaanite? Explaining himself to her? To himself? *Sorry, I only give to beggars who reside in Montgomery County. You beggars in the District will have to find one of your own people to help you out.*

“Lord, help me,” she says. She's kneeling now. This is tough. Maybe he sees Peter sinking in the waves, calling out, “Lord, save me.” But tradition and his conviction about his own limited mission, to Israel only, push him to hold the line, to believe there *is* a defining difference between Peter and this Canaanite.

He calls the woman a dog. (Oh, the thing that comes out of his mouth!) All I can say is, it's a good thing his mother isn't here.

He says it would be unfair to his own people, *his* children, if he shows her mercy, heals *her* child. As if there's not enough to go around; as if he can't multiply mercy as he multiplied bread and fish.

Hoping, perhaps, she'll take offense and choose to go away, leave him alone. That she'll realize it's not possible for him to give what she's asked. That she was out of line to ask in the first place. Her fault, not his failure.

But, unlike the Pharisees and scribes just now, she refuses to take offense. Though she is neither a Jew nor his follower, she sees what is in him—boundless mercy and compassion—and presses him until he sees it in himself. She will not let him go until he blesses her.

I don't know about you, but I experience this story as both scary and exhilarating. In a few lines, it exposes both my fear and my faith. The fear being that the proposition that there are immutable boundaries might prevail; that God's mercy might turn out to have boundaries as narrow as ours.

I do not believe that, but in his encounter with the by-definition-other-and-outsider Canaanite woman, Jesus walks right up to that position and tries it on for size. That is scary, and it is important.

In Matthew's mixed Jewish-Gentile Christian community, the questions: *How big is God's tent?* *How wide is God's mercy?* and *Are we supposed to be guarding the door?* are live questions.

This is a live question for Paul in his letter to the Romans, as we've been hearing for the past few weeks. Most of his fellow Jews have rejected Jesus as the Messiah. The Gentiles are accepting him in droves. Now that they are in relationship with God, is God's mercy for the Jews over, at an end? Has God rejected them? How wide *is* God's mercy?

These are live questions today. Loud voices insist that there are whole categories of people who are, by definition, excluded or not fully included in the mercy of God. Who is seen as excluded, whom "we" should despise, apparently depends on where the speaker is from, what his or her religion or ideology is. So those defined out might be Muslims or Jews, Christians or Sikhs, Hindus or atheists, gay and lesbian persons, people of a different race, color, or class, people born in a different country or region.

But that is not how this story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman ends. When Jesus tries on the narrow view of mercy for size, it turns out to be too small. (What a relief!) The story ends with Jesus commending her: "Woman, great is your faith!" She is "woman," not dog, not other, enemy, or usurper. There are no boundaries and no bounds; anyone may call upon God's mercy and receive it.

Paul reaches the same conclusion: God's purpose is to be merciful to all. And in Genesis, Joseph realizes that the hidden hand of God has been active in all his trials, to bring mercy not only to his own family but also to the Egyptians. All the peoples of the earth begin to bless themselves in Abraham's descendants—as promised.

Still, alive as these stories may be among us this morning, when I read the news, I have to ask myself sometimes, *where is the mercy of God visibly at work, today?* There is so much

division in the world: between the hungry and the overfed; the unemployed and the overpaid; the homeless and people who live in palaces; people seeking justice and freedom, and governments responding with bullets, tanks, walls, bulldozers.

Our confidence is that in God's time all things will be healed, set right, redeemed, restored. But sometimes I feel discouraged. Then I am reminded—

by cans and boxes of food in baskets in the narthex, food you have brought for hungry people in Montgomery County, that will be brought forward as part of our offering this morning by new backpacks you make possible for schoolchildren served by Transitional Housing

by Hope for Burundi that, with the help of a grant, saved dozens of the most vulnerable from starvation in Kirundo Province last year

by the community of Street Church that bridges the divide between us and the homeless and dispossessed

by this year's Summer Music Camp that brought together children from the parish and neighborhood, the Bishop Walker School, Sitar Arts Center in Adams Morgan, and Misa Alegria, to create harmony by making music together

by the countless people of all faiths shocked into the realization after 9/11 that we dare not live by a limited understanding of God's mercy, as if it were only for some ("us") and not others ("them")—

There *is* a wideness in God's mercy. It circulates in, among and around us. It crosses whatever borders and boundaries we human beings try to construct. It is broader than we can even begin to see or imagine. And it aims to stretch and broaden us to be more merciful, to become channels of the boundless mercy that enfolds us and all the children of God—everyone, every one.