

If we ever in any doubt that sin and evil can be powerful forces, the last few weeks should have completely disabused us of that notion, just as Jesus identifies exactly the same kind of reality when he says, “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.” We are seeing plenty of that right now and it’s hard not to feel totally overwhelmed.

But, in this very same passage from the gospel, something new is being revealed to us. So I hope you were paying attention this morning. In fact, what you just heard is unique in the gospel record. This is the one and only place in the gospel where Jesus appears to be not only confused about his actions, but defeated by the argument of a woman! In no other place will you discover a Jesus who is wrong.

And he is wrong. There he is. The leader of the new Israel, the proclaimer of the arrival of the Kingdom of God, the acknowledged Messiah by many of his followers, and even in his own psyche. He’s the man with the power and the woman knows it. So why shouldn’t she expect this Jesus to heal her ailing child – after all, that’s what he has

been running around doing. She has a child in need and this is the man that can make a difference.

But there's a problem. The problem is that she is not of Israel. She is not one of the chosen to whom Jesus has spoken. He has treated women with revolutionary consideration during his ministry, he has many disciples and friends who are women – but they are all Jewish. This woman, the woman asking for help, is a foreigner, a Canaanite, a pagan, a worshipper of a different God, following the precepts of another faith, a national of a country deeply alienated from Jesus and his like.

At first Jesus responds to the woman as most of us do when we are faced with an embarrassing demand we do not intend to fulfill. He ignores her.

But the woman, desperate for help, persists. The disciples seem a little thinner skinned. Unable to stand her any longer they demand Jesus send her away. Jesus speaks to the woman and insists his mission is only to the House of Israel. But still the woman begs for help.

Who knows at what point Jesus experiences the revelation of a new truth? Who can know how and why he suddenly connected the voice of this despised person with his vision of the kingdom of heaven – but he

does. And in that moment there is healing. “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”

Wow!

But why in the world did Matthew include this little story in his gospel? Why on earth would he have preserved a tale that seems to show Jesus in such a poor light? What was he trying to do – for you can be sure Matthew has this story in here for a reason.

Just look at what happened. Jesus is the person with the authority and the power. He is approached by someone he regarded as being totally outside his frame of reference, outside his divine mission. She might be in need but he wasn't going to expend his power on her.

But the woman refuses to shut up. She refuses to go away. And she persists until Jesus is able to see things in a new light, until Jesus acts on her behalf. By the end of this story the daughter is healed, the woman's faith has been rewarded, and Jesus has been changed.

This incident is a precious document for the church. It is a roadmap of how to live in the midst of confusion and fear. I don't need to remind you that we too live in a time of change – change is our only constant. Politically and culturally we are being taught to be afraid – and it doesn't matter whether that is fear of religious fanaticism, terrorism, war, unemployment, illness, crime, violence, racism, or any other form

of human brokenness and sin. We are to be afraid and to act out of that fear. We are supposed to find who is to blame and act accordingly – to circle the wagons and protect ourselves from that which is unknown, uncertain, or outside our frame of reference.

But in this gospel today we see the opposite. If the Son of Man and the Son of God was not the possessor of all knowledge who made right decisions one hundred percent of the time, then how much more must that be true of ourselves. If Jesus himself had to learn that his mission was much bigger than he could ever have imagined then how much more must we.

Matthew's gospel was directed at a young church seeking to understand itself. The big question in their day was to ask whether the gospel was for the Jews only or for all the world? If Jesus healed the child of an untouchable, how were they to view other untouchable groups around them? If Jesus took action on behalf of the disenfranchised were they to do the same? And if Jesus actually helped a person they would have rejected how did this change their way of understanding of who belonged in the kingdom of God?

These issues are the same today as they were then and even before Jesus. Centuries before him, Isaiah was already writing, "Maintain justice and do what is right." and, "Do not let the foreigner joined to

the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely separate me from his people'; and do not let the eunuch say, 'I am just a dry tree.'" And "for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples," but the people were not able to hear it.

God is not limited, but we are. There can be nothing and no-one beyond the saving love of our Creator. All that stands between us and that love is our own prejudice, fear, and misunderstanding. Each of us, in our own way, is confronted by our individual limits at different times and moments in our own story. The critical issue is what we will do in the midst of confusion. For it is at such moments that the truth breaks through.

Eddie Wilson, a young high school junior in Mississippi during the civil rights movement of the sixties describes such a moment when he tells the story of the integration of his own school. A huge admirer of the school football coach, he looks forward to his class with this favorite figure but, on walking into the room, Eddie sees a black student. The student is sitting alone at his desk. It is the decisive moment in Eddie's history and it is a moment of truth. He must choose and, whichever choice he makes, it will have consequences.

Looking around at his fellow students he walks over to the boy and sits down. As he does so he sees a noose made out of a cord from a Venetian blind. It has been placed on the desk of the black student. The coach sees it too. It is the decisive moment in the history of the coach. Sending the new student to fetch supplies, the coach lambastes the students for their ignorance and intolerance. When the black student returns all is well.

Just imagine if each and every one of us paid attention to what is needed and acted to make it happen.

There is no limit to the love of God. There can be no limit to ours. We may stumble and fall. We may fail. There will be one decisive moment after another and Jesus is relying on us to act. It is OK to be afraid, but it is not OK to be imprisoned by it. There will be times when we think we know the truth but will need to be ready to see we are wrong and embrace new truth. Our thinking may be muddled but our actions have to be strong, just, loving and true. Mohandas Gandhi observed that "God never appears to you in person but always in action."

May it be said of us that our faith is great, our acts generous, and our love steadfast and true. Amen.

