August 16, 2026 prpr 15 Remember Who You Are

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey St. Matthias Episcopal Church, Minocqua, Wisconsin

There is a pivotal scene in the 1994 Disney movie *The Lion King* that is a lot like today's Gospel. For those who have never watched the movie or the successful Broadway show based on it, *The Lion King* is about a lion named Simba who was set to inherit his father's kingdom until his dissatisfied uncle killed his father and convinced Simba his father's death was his fault. Simba ran away, leaving his uncle to claim leadership over the kingdom. In his self-imposed exile, Simba met two charming characters who welcomed him into their isolated paradise free of responsibilities. One night several years later, a grown-up Simba thought he heard his father's voice in a thunderstorm telling him to remember who he is.

This reminder changed Simba and motivated him to return to his home, claim his place as leader, and restore his kingdom to health and wholeness after his uncle's selfish leadership had devastated it.

While not a voice in a thunderstorm, the Canaanite woman in today's Gospel gave Jesus the same pivotal message, one that inspired Jesus to change. It was probably a change that was needed because the exchange between Jesus and the Canaanite woman is not comfortable. Perhaps it seems ironic that just after Jesus gave a lecture to the religious elite about how breaking the purity laws like what kinds of food to eat, how to prepare them, and ritual washing doesn't defile a person but how people speak to each other does, that Jesus ignored a person's plea for help and after she persisted, he called her an insulting, offensive name. Some might say that feels like hypocrisy, especially when today's collect calls us to follow Jesus' example of a godly life. Good thing there's more to this story.

Lots of commentators give Jesus excuses for his crass rudeness, pointing out his humanity and suspecting he may have been feeling tired or overwhelmed. Those who have been keeping up with the Sunday Gospel readings this summer know the reason for the suspected fatigue. We've been reading how Jesus has been on a mission to reveal who he is through teachings, miracles, sermons, parables, and conversations with religious leaders. And while the folks who experienced these things certainly appreciated the spectacle of feeding thousands and healing the sick, his message had been going over everyone's heads. No one seemed to get that he is the Messiah and God's kingdom of heaven is breaking into the world through him. Moreover, Jesus had defined his mission as limited to his own people, to the point of restricting his disciples from sharing his message with outsiders until the right time. Jesus had a plan and was sticking to it. That it wasn't quite working the way he may have intended didn't matter.

Then this woman showed up in today's Gospel. An outsider from another tribe. Possibly even in a different socioeconomic class. Definitely not one of Jesus' people. Only, it turns out, she was.

We don't know much about the woman. We don't know what she looked like or what she was wearing. We don't know her age or what church she went to. She doesn't seem to have a male relative with her to do the talking for her. We do know she was willing to challenge societal and cultural norms by speaking directly to a man in public, something women were not permitted to do. Which might be why Jesus ignored her at first.

We know she was a mother and her daughter was ill and this woman believed Jesus could restore her daughter to wholeness. Not because Jesus was a traveling miracle man or healer, but because Jesus is the Messiah. This is the pivotal part of Matthew's Gospel. Unlike his own people, this woman whose name we don't know recognized who Jesus is and took it upon herself to remind him.

Notice that each time she spoke to Jesus, she addressed him as Lord. This wasn't a performative nicety, nor was she being submissive. She was telling him she knew who he is. When Jesus refused to help her because she wasn't one of his kind, the woman didn't respond with indignation or anger. She didn't protest. She didn't call out his hypocrisy. She didn't cancel him on social media.

Instead, she did something religious. She knelt before him. Kneeling is an act of respect. Like kneeling for prayer or going down on one knee to propose. The woman's body language revealed she wasn't begging a miracle man to cure her daughter, she was asking the Messiah to do what the Messiah is supposed to do. That is significant. The Messiah was to fulfill God's promise to God's people and like we read in the other readings this morning, that designation wasn't limited to race or what church a person goes to. All people are made in God's image, and the Messiah would embody God's healing, restorative, life giving love to everyone, especially those willing to receive it.

Even after Jesus refused her again with an insult, the woman did not get offended or lash out in anger. Instead, she reminded him of who he is by reminding him God is God of all people. It's still God's table no matter who is at the table, and at God's table there is enough for all. Giving something to one person does not mean anyone else loses anything. There is more than enough of God and God's love for everyone.

This woman recognized who Jesus is when his own people did not and had the faith they did not. The kind of faith that is so powerful it changed Jesus' mind and heart and brought healing and wholeness to the woman's daughter. It must have meant a lot to Jesus too, because after this encounter, Jesus never again said anything about only being sent to his own people. After this encounter, Jesus changed. He changed his plan, he changed his mission, he changed like the times in the Old Testament when God changed God's mind to show mercy. Perhaps it was God's voice Jesus recognized in the woman who reminded Jesus who he is by asking for God's promise to be fulfilled through him.

Sometimes we all need that same kind of reminder. The reminder that we are all made in God's image, that we are all God's beloved, and when one person receives God's mercy no one else loses anything. Today's Gospel reveals that reminder can come from anywhere or anyone, even someone who is not easy to listen to, someone we may have relegated as other. I know there are lots of messages telling us to take what we can for ourselves, to refuse responsibility by blaming someone else, to point the finger, to ignore. Not all messages are from God. God's messages are like the ones from the movie *The Lion King* or the words of the woman that ask us to remember who we are. We are God's beloved and as such are to share God's love as best we can through generosity, forgiveness, even being willing to change so that everyone can share the goodness of God's table where no matter how much is shared or given, no one loses anything, because there is always more than enough of God.