

Outcast or Kindred
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In 2004, the United Church of Christ launched a campaign called "God is Still Speaking," to remind us that God still has a lot more to say. It was an effort to make religion relevant again and to extend an extravagant welcome to all, as they said, "because no matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here at the United Church of Christ." I have to admit to a certain skepticism when this was first launched. Part of it was that the symbol they used was a comma, as in, "don't put a period where God has put a comma." And I thought, "Really? A punctuation mark as a religious symbol?" It seemed too small, kind of trite. And then, maybe because I read the Bible a lot, and listen through that reading, I thought, "Well of course God is still speaking: I hear new Good News every time I open this book. I hear more Good News every time I see love in action. God speaking all the time. Duh!"

Today, though, we get concrete examples in Scripture of God still speaking *in the course of* the biblical text. So, either God is changing the divine mind about some important matters, or human beings are finally listening more carefully, apart from their own desires and prejudices.

To start with, we have that beautiful verse at the beginning of Psalm 133: "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!" No argument there! But, it does beg the question: who is kindred? Is it my sibling, or my great aunt, or my 2nd cousin or my 17th cousin (I use this last because people like to do the math and say that everyone on earth is related in the degree of 17th cousin or closer). With whom do we seek this very good and pleasant relationship? And whom do we legitimately cast out? This is one of the primary areas in which we hear God speak.

At various times in the history of the Hebrews and of the Christian church, this was a question of purity. People feared contamination, and they feared difference as a source of contamination. Especially in a time when their world was in flux, when they felt threatened, they sought the grounding and assurance of sameness and solidarity. When the books of the law, Leviticus and Deuteronomy were written, they drew boundaries around groups of people: those who should be excluded from temple worship and those who could be included. In rather blunt language, they singled out men who had been maimed or gelded as excluded from the assembly of worshippers. They also said that anyone born of an "illegal" marriage and any Ammonite or Moabite should be excluded for the next ten generations. After the trauma of the exile in Babylon, the priestly establishment said that the Babylonian captivity had resulted from contamination by foreign ways and influences that had led Israel "to become like any other nation and to forfeit her life as the holy people of God (Ezek. 20:32)." Exclusion was the tool by which they could become holy again. But the minority voice, The God is Still Speaking voice, was heard this morning. A new vision of community looked for God's mercy to be extended to all peoples because of God's own holiness. For this prophet, membership in the people of God is not a matter of blood or soil, but of commitment. In fact, it explicitly says that God "gathers the outcast of Israel" and then joins other outcasts to them. Our common denominator is that of the outcast being gathered in by arms of

mercy. God speaks and overcomes our own worst impulses by establishing a community of outcasts, one defined neither by the culture of the establishment nor by any other alternative culture, but by its desire to follow God.

Interestingly, both the protectionist view of the priests and the universalist view of Third Isaiah made it into our Scriptures. I find this to be a fascinating record of the tensions human beings experience between openness and exclusion as the key to survival, or indeed to the abundant life. And somehow, God is still speaking, challenging us to new understandings of covenant, inciting us to find kinship with those of other sexualities, other abilities, other nations, or other races. In that tradition and in that understanding, we made our Open and Affirming resolution in 2005.

Our story from Matthew's Gospel is an even more striking example of the evolving nature of God's voice, because Jesus is the main actor and Jesus is the one listening. He has just left his home ground of Galilee, having engaged in debate with Pharisees and scribes on theological questions of purity. He goes with his disciples northwest, into the coastal Phoenician area, where Jews would be a distinct minority. We are told that a Canaanite woman starts shouting and following this group of Jewish men around. Now this is a curious designation, "Canaanite." It would be like calling someone from Minnesota a Viking, or someone of the Abenaki tribe a savage heathen. It seems that it is meant to send us back to an earlier era, to remind us of past conflict. If we do this, we end up back in the books of law, in the story of the Exodus, where we hear God speaking:

"When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than yourselves, and when the LORD your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. (Deut 7:1-4)" So...Canaanites are the ones to whom no mercy is to be shown. God said so, long ago, apparently. And that justifies conquest, racial purity, violence, the nuclear option, fire and fury...and allows us to imagine this Canaanite woman and her daughter as the worst of outsiders.

It almost looks as though Jesus is allowing this centuries-old justification for conquest to become a rule for his own actions. But this woman persists, as many have done before and since. His disciples, want him to be more firm: "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." So annoying, so inappropriate, this desperate woman. When Jesus does speak, it is not even clear that he is dignifying the woman with a direct address: he speaks above her head, not even contaminating himself that much: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." The Canaanite woman does not let him off that easily. She blocks his way, kneels down, and asks for help, asks for mercy. Jesus responds with some of the hardest words to hear in the whole Gospel. He basically calls her a dog, sub-human. "It's not fair," he says...nothing about mercy or help, but about limited resources and who gets what. But, God is still speaking, and he speaks through her mouth: "OK, I am a dog, but there's enough here for everyone. I still believe you can hear me and help me."

Finally, the light goes on. Someone gets converted and repents (and it's not the Canaanite.) Jesus hears the faith behind her plea, grants her request, and heals her daughter. It appears that

Jesus has heard a voice; Jesus has turned around; he has been confronted with and has learned the meaning of his own definition of the word “mercy.” The story of the Canaanite woman is a story of Jesus’ own “conversion.” In this narrative the Israelite is conquered by the Canaanite; the chosen one is conquered by the outcast; a member of the peoples who were shown “no mercy” is now shown mercy. And they miraculously become kindred, living together in unity.

In our day, God is still speaking to us through Scripture, through our common life together and through our response to injustice. I don’t have to tell you that we are living in a time of renewed discourse, civil and otherwise, about questions of race and purity, about questions of exclusion and belonging, about centuries-old and decades-old racial grievances. The church is uniquely called to speak for non-violence because we have learned from our tradition how susceptible humans are to the need for conquest. The church is uniquely called to speak for racial justice because we have learned from our tradition that white supremacy is a sin. The church is uniquely called to prophetic witness because we have learned, from the great people in our tradition, and from our rabbi Jesus, that to keep silent in the face of injustice is to be complicit. And if that brings us into conflict with systems and ideologies of hatred and exclusion, then Hallelujah, Lord, lead us on!

Back in 2009, Alton Pollard, the dean of Howard University’s Divinity School said in an interview: “There is no prophetic witness without the possibility of confrontation, but if there is a consistency about your witness then there’s also a confidence about the long-term possibilities for human community that will come out of it.” 2,500 years ago, someone heard God speaking about the long-term possibilities for human community, about the possibility that one place could be a house of prayer for all peoples. 2000 years ago, someone heard God speaking about the long-term possibilities for human community, about overcoming centuries of animosity with one persistent woman and one healing gesture. Today, I seek a consistency in our witness in the wake of the Charlottesville tragedy. I seek the confidence that our stand against hate groups based on racism, anti-Semitism, anti-LGBTQ folks will bear fruits of justice and peace. I live in hope that our nation can reclaim its moral compass.

The German theologian Karl Barth, a Christian witness in the time of Nazi power, said, “To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.”

Let us pray..... Let your ways, oh God, be known upon earth, and your saving health among all nations. Let all the peoples, upon whom you have poured out your mercy and your blessing, praise you, and honor you by extending that mercy to all. Amen.