"Gathered and Gathering Again" A Sermon preached by The Rev. Dr. C. Denise Yarbrough on Sunday, August 16,2026 at St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Penn Yan, NY

Thus says the LORD: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed…my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered. (Isaiah 56:1,8)

"Listen and understand: [11]it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles."…But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. [19]For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. [20]These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile." (Matt. 15:10-11;18-19)… 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. (Matt. 15:27-28)

I received an email this week from a Muslim colleague at the Islamic Center of Rochester inviting those of us who have been engaged in Christian Muslim dialogue to a meeting in early September. My friend wrote, "The current state of affairs is not good, where two sitting senators, three sitting congresswomen, and a governor are spewing hate about Islam in America. These Islamophobic responses have amplified after Dr. Abdul El-Sayed's win in Michigan, and this makes our mission even more important to counter this venomous propaganda." Unfortunately, all kinds of hate speech has been normalized in our culture in the past number of years, as Islamophobia, antisemitism, racial prejudice, and xenophobic discourse have become commonplace in social media and popular culture. We are living in a moment when public speech is coarse, cruel and weaponized. When leaders model name calling as strength. When bullying is treated as political strategy. When contempt becomes entertainment. When compassion and kindness are considered weak or sinful.

Our reading from the prophet Isaiah today offers a vision of the world that is radically different from the contemptuous, scornful and derisive norm with which we are now living. The prophet is clear about the expansiveness of God's compassion and love for all of God's children. God's house is not a fortress and it's not a purity zone. It is, the prophet says, "a house of prayer for all people." Moreover, God is gathering more and more people into that divine house, specifically "others besides those already gathered." Isaiah's vision is an expansive and inclusive one, that allows for the peaceful co-existence of all sorts and conditions of people. Our culture is treating difference as a threat, rather than seeing all people as neighbors

worthy of love and respect. Isaiah is clear that God gathers those whom society often pushes out.

Then Jesus in his argument with the Pharisees with respect to ritual purity laws declares unequivocally that "what comes out of the mouth defiles" when it expresses evil intentions, threats, slander, and other evil thoughts that result in equally evil actions. Words do matter, and when they are weaponized bullying words, designed to intimidate and threaten the safety and dignity of those who are "other" they defile us.

In June 1967, just ten months before he was assassinated, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. published a book entitled *"Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community?"* His words, written nearly 60 years ago in the context of the struggle for Civil Rights and desegregation, speak directly to our current crisis. King wrote in a moment of national fracture. He saw clearly that violence in speech leads to violence in action. He saw that contempt corrodes democracy. He echoed the vision of Isaiah as he observed that all the peoples of the earth share a common home, and he implored us to learn to live together in what he called a "world house." He was clear: "we must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools."

As we struggle to be faithful disciples of Jesus in these troubled times, we are called not only to listen to his teachings as we heard them this morning, but also to model his actions. The portion of Matthew's gospel that we heard today presents a paradoxical picture of Jesus. In the first section of the reading he is the spiritual and moral teacher and preacher calling us to be our best selves, to live according to the core values and principles of our religion. He excoriates those whose words and actions "defile" through slander, false witness and evil intent. And then, in the very next scene, he fails to follow his own teachings, as he dismissively rebuffs a Canaanite woman who falls at his feet seeking healing for her daughter.

The Canaanite woman is from a nation considered to be "foreigners" to Jesus and his followers. She is "the Other." When she first approaches him, Jesus is downright rude to her. First, he simply ignores her. Then, when she continues to plead for her daughter's relief, he finally deigns to speak with her, but hurls an insult at her as his opening salvo, comparing her to a dog. But she refuses to accept his contempt as her identity. She speaks back with courage and wit. And Jesus listens. Humbled and chastened, he grants her request and heals her daughter. He praises her for her great faith. In this moment, Jesus widens the circle, embracing someone previously pushed out. We see Jesus in a moment of weakness, falling prey to the prejudices of his day as he first rebuffs and insults her. But when she responds to his inhumanity by continuing to demand justice, he repents of his meanness and disrespect, he recognizes her humanity and offers her his healing grace. His soul and hers meet in God and Jesus honors the sacredness of her humanity. In that reconciling moment, Jesus and the woman and her daughter are all healed.

Dr. King called upon Christians and the Christian church to take seriously its call to be a prophetic voice, denouncing racism in all its forms. "The church has a special obligation. It is the voice of moral and spiritual authority on earth. ...If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority. A religion true to its mission knows that [racism] is morally wrong and sinful...It is unbrotherly and impersonal. Two segregated souls never meet in God. Segregation [racism] denies the sacredness of human personality." (pp. 101-102) And more importantly, Dr. King reminds his readers that "to ignore evil is to become an accomplice to it." (p.91)

As St. Mark's continues its journey of envisioning the future, looking back at where we've been and trying to discern where we are going, we do well to note how we have embodied Isaiah's prophetic vision of a "house of prayer for all people." We have lived that vision, in our advocacy, in our welcome, in our insistence that faith must be expressed in justice. We have always spoken up for neighbors who are pushed aside – the LGBTQ community, immigrants, the poor and forgotten in our community. We have stood with communities targeted by prejudice. We have strived to practice the kind of compassion Dr. King wrote about, and to exercise the courage to choose community when the world chooses chaos. We have striven to be a voice of moral and spiritual authority in our community. As we embark on envisioning the future for this congregation, a future not yet fully visible, our path is illuminated by the faithfulness we have already shown.

Jesus teaches us today that what comes out of the mouth reveals the heart. And he also teaches that when what comes out of the mouth hurts others, it is possible to repent, to heal the hurt and move into a healthy and respectful relationship. What has come out of St. Mark's over many decades – prayers, advocacy, welcome to those who might feel unwelcome elsewhere, hospitality, truth-telling and healing- reveals hearts committed to God's widening circle of compassion, mercy and truth. We have embodied what it means to be a "house of prayer for all people."

Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman underscores the truth that faith often comes from the edges. This congregation has always been willing to listen to the voices at the edges and to learn from them, to be changed by them, to be led by them. So our invitation today is not to look back at what was difficult, but to look forward to what is possible. To trust that God is gathering us yet again into a future shaped by justice, compassion and courageous, respectful speech.

We have community. We strive to embody the wideness of God's mercy. As we envision our future together we will carry that legacy forward, into whatever God is preparing for us next. Amen.