

Have Mercy on Me!, Sermon August 16, 2026, by Rev. R. Randy Day

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 56:1, 6-8 and Matthew 15:10-28

Let me say a few words about this passage from Matthew, and I'm indebted to Richard Ward, who is a professor at the Luther Seminary and did research on this.

Last week we had Jesus walking on the water, right? The week before we fed the 5000, and today we have this story where there's still the multitude, but they're moving. They're kind of moving. They've been moving through Galilee, and now they are in present-day Lebanon. Another one of my favorite countries, I might say. Lebanon, Indonesia. I have several favorites. Love Lebanon. Beautiful place. Suffering way too much.

Tyre and Sidon are two cities in modern-day Lebanon. They are on the Mediterranean, and it's not far from Galilee. But if you're walking, it's a distance. And so Jesus and the disciples and the multitude have left Galilee. They're in this border area. That's why the word "foreign" is used. It's kind of a foreign territory, the Canaanites, and we have to remember from biblical history that the Canaanites were enemy number one to the Jews. So you're not only in the foreign country; you don't know about these Canaanites.

That's the first point to make, that when they were traveling there, the whole thing about the foreigner, so that symbolizes in a way a transition that's taking place in Matthew. Not only a geographic transition which I just described, but also a transition in the thinking of the Jewish community.

Almost all scholars believe, as I said last week and maybe the week before—I probably say it next week—Matthew is writing to the Jewish community. Last week we mentioned he was writing after the other gospels. I know "Matthew, Mark, and Luke" but they didn't put Matthew in chronological order. He wrote his later, as I said last week. Peter had already been crucified, so he's appealing to the Jewish group.

So you have all these people in these new churches. They mostly were raised in the Jewish faith, believing deeply the laws of God, the practices of God, all the things they've been taught. But then along comes the message from Jesus that all authority on earth and in heaven has been given to me.

Whoa.

That's what the resurrected Jesus said. "All authority on earth and in heaven has been given to me". So how does that line up to all of the Jewish teachings and traditions? What are these folks going to do?

Did they have a lot of discussion groups? I don't know, but Matthew's trying to say to them, "We're not going to throw out all the traditions, but a new day has come."

And he looks specifically at the rules, which you find in Leviticus (a lot of people skip over Leviticus with all these rules) - you're not supposed to eat this, that, and the other. That's kosher food.

So he's saying it's not what you put into your mouth. It's not the fact that the disciples were eating on Sunday. It's not the fact they didn't wash their hands or wash the food. Jesus saying, "It's what comes out of your mouth that defiles you. What comes out of your mouth," which I think is a pretty pertinent lesson for today,

because you don't have to listen to too many news cycles or even people in front of you or behind you at the supermarket, wherever.

A lot of junk is coming out of the mouths of a lot of people, so it's not only, as I said, how we act, but it's what we say. So this is the very point Jesus is making. It's the words that come out of your mouth that defile you.

Now, another point. There are several points I want to make.

So he's trying to convince the Jews that they can be comfortable in their tradition, but also welcome Jesus as a savior and move forward.

Now Paul didn't have these hang-ups. Those of you who read much of the New Testament, you've heard many—you know, Galatians and Romans and Corinthians, all that Paul says several times. There's no male or female. There's no Jew or Greek.

Oh, what does that mean? There's no Jew or Greek. He's saying the gospel is for everybody.

Paul is saying you don't have to become a Jew before you can become a Christian. So, all you Greeks and Romans and anyone else we encounter, whatever your spiritual background may be, you are welcome into the Church of Jesus Christ. Not necessary that you be part of Judaism first.

That's really, really important because most of the world was not Jewish, and if you look at the history, the church expanded, expanded, expanded. We've become one of the great world religions.

So we're not encountering Judaism as we moved into Europe, or moved into India, or moved below the Sahara Desert into Africa. No. So Paul's thinking, Paul's preaching, is much wider theologically, and it really paid off historically.

But Matthew is struggling with this community, his community. He was Jewish. He was the tax collector. Remember, Jesus came by and said, "Hey, I'm calling you. Matthew said, "Great, come over to my house." And, well, he became a disciple, and he wrote this gospel.

Just want you to know what this is about.

This is really a difficult passage. I don't know about my clergy colleague, but sometimes, although I follow a lectionary, I just say, "I'm skipping this one." Really, I almost did.

Jesus' behavior is awful. You read through this carefully. The way he treats the Canaanite woman: first of all, treating a woman. Secondly, a foreigner.

So what? Well, the Jews didn't like the Canaan. We know that. We know the reasons, and Jesus was fully human. At the same time, he's fully God, right? So he had his own—I don't know if you use the word prejudice—he had his own feelings about the Canaanites, and here she comes along, making a lot of noise.

How do we know that? The disciples said, "Can you send her away? She's annoying and she's loud. You know, we can't do our spiritual study here, but she's doing all this stuff."

Well, she's a mother like many of you sitting in here and watching out there. You're going to defend your kid. You're going to go to bat for your kid.

Her daughter's sick. We don't know the age of her daughter—four years old or 44. We don't know the age of this daughter—child, adult. Doesn't make any difference. She's advocating for her daughter, so she approaches Jesus, and it seems to me she puts up with the harassment of the disciples for some time, and we just heard from Brad what was said.

They were basically saying, go away and this, that, and the other, and the whole thing about the crumbs — even the dogs eat. She says even the dogs eat the crumbs.

So Jesus is really talking down to her. It's almost public humiliation, and who in the heck needs that?

So one commentary said, "Well, maybe this was a learning experience for Jesus, not only in a new geographic territory, but kind of in a new territory, dealing with other folks." I think I buy into that.

We don't really have a problem, do we? Thinking of the young Jesus in Nazareth, hanging out with his dad in the carpentry shop, and learning skills to be a carpenter. He learned things as a human being, but somehow I think in our minds we freeze the adult Jesus like he's perfect, so perfect that there were no learning experiences.

I think this just might have been a learning experience, and that God was really saying to Jesus, "You got to open up and expand this," and He does.

His moment comes through when she talks about her faith, and He said, "Woman, your faith has healed your daughter at this very day."

So it's a big turnaround. It's very dramatic. If you wade through this, it's a big turnaround for Jesus, and I believe the disciples were paying attention. Certainly, Matthew was because he wrote about it.

And so we are all called, just as the Canaanite woman was blessed. We're all called to be agents of God, to bring forth light, no matter where that may be, no matter what country that may be, no matter how we tag other people as foreigners, migrants, insurgents.

I mean, the vocabulary goes on and on and on.

If we don't like people and they don't look like us, we can find all kinds of ways to dismiss them, to get rid of them.

Again, it's the words that come out of our mouths, and some of those words we're putting into laws and rules in order to move folks away. Not only the United States and Europe, other parts of Africa, Asia. A lot of this is going on.

So where does all of this bring us today? It's kind of heavy, huh, for a summer summer day. I know last week was a heavy sermon, so I'm just kind of asking, like, where are we on our journeys?

And so I think most of us know that over in Falmouth today is the 53rd Falmouth Road Race. It is such an historic event that some of the elite runners of the international community show up, a lot of locals show up, a lot of people travel to get to it and the traffic's going to be horrendous as we try to go home, right?

It's a great time in the summer to, if not be in a race, take a road trip. You've all been on road trips, right? Maybe you're planning some new ones.

So I ran across an article written by Stephen Hilner, called *Two Wheels, 14 Days, 2,448 Miles on a Motorcycle Tour of Route 66.*

Yeah, Route 66.

I know about it because it starts in Chicago, right north of my home, comes down through Pontiac and Normal, where Martha's from, and into Bloomington. There's a stretch in downtown Bloomington, not far from Illinois Wesley, where Thomas went and where I went. It's still Route 66, and the cafes and the restaurants all advertise it.

Then you go on down through Illinois. You come to St. Louis. Then you start angling south and west, south and west, you know, through Missouri and Oklahoma and all those states until finally you come to California.

This is beautiful writing by Hilner. Let me just share a bit:

It's a common refrain that Route 66 no longer exists, and it's true, in a way. The 100-year-old road that stretches from Chicago to Santa Monica was decommissioned in 1985. You won't find it listed on modern maps as a contiguous highway, and yet the 2,448-mile road, at first largely unpaved, then over time populated with so many motels, diners, and outlandish attractions that it became central to the American experience. Only later to be bypassed, forgotten, left to crumble, and yet somehow it endures.

Earlier this year, in celebration of the road's 100th birthday, I spent 14 days tracing the original path of Route 66 as best I could from Illinois to California, across fresh pavement, old concrete, weathered bricks, and even isolated patches of dirt, prepared for lonely stretches of empty highway.

I frequently found myself in the company of joyful travelers.

If you're taking notes, write that down. Joyful travelers.

If you go on road trips, you want to be a joyful traveler, not a complainer. All right, all right.

Joyful travelers expecting decay. I instead discovered renewal, often in the form of hobbyist historians who pour their passion into preserving and conveying eccentric works of American art.

He has a lot of examples. I'm going to give you only one or two.

This is also in Illinois, not far from my home, just outside of this little town in Illinois. It said, "Nilwood, Illinois, population 200."

There's a set of dainty turkey tracks impressed in the roadway, framed by thick white paint. Here's a picture, somewhat painted white all around them, leaving a set of erratic footprints.

When you look at them, it looks like a couple birds walked across the fresh cement. You know, maybe 100 years ago, still there. They marked it off, so you can keep going through all those sorts of things: motels and diners and everything. It goes on and on and on.

Route 66 provided this escape for people during the Dust Bowl and during the Depression, and I'll get to that in just a second.

But this motorcyclist, this reporter, ended up at the big sign that says "End of the Trail."

Know where it is? Any of you been?

End of the trail, the Santa Monica Pier. That's the end of Route 66.

He's sitting there with his helmet in his lap after these 14 days on a motorcycle, breakdowns, all kinds of stuff, and he could feel some tears coming to his eyes.

Do you ever experience the end of a journey? Yeah, it's kind of over.

My niece left camp yesterday, and she cried. You know, you think back to all those camps when you left the last day. Oh, you cry. You just said something is over, and it's emotional.

So he feels these tears welling up in his eyes, and then this very outgoing, spirited traveler approached him. His name is Blake Peterson. He's a clock repairman from Utah. He had his motorcycle there, and it turns out he was starting his journey from the Santa Monica Pier to travel east, all that same distance to Chicago.

Ends for one, and start for the other.

Now, in a more serious way, a serious note. Route 66 is mentioned as the Mother Highway.

You know who said that? Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath*. "The Mother Highway".

And Steinbeck, a Californian, who also wrote *The Cannery Row*, *East of Eden*, and others. He wrote all those, and he talked about poverty. He talked about how people are sometimes used as toys by the system.

He wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*, reflecting upon the Depression and the Dust Bowl in places like Oklahoma in particular, and he follows this one family, the Joads.

He wrote this novel in 1939. None of you are that old, remember, but I'm just telling you, 1939. He wrote the novel. The next year, John Ford came out and directed a movie based on the novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*.

You can see it this afternoon on YouTube, absolutely free. It's the most moving movie. Okay, it's so powerful to live with these folks for a few days as they're traveling on Route 66, leaving, they've lost everything.

They lost the farm, they lost the ground, they lost the home. What few belongings they have, they put on a big old truck, which the movie portrays quite well. And then the whole family jumps on there, and off they go.

Grandpa dies along the way, and this, that, and the other. You often see signs in the movie Route 66 clearly there. And Steinbeck talks about that whole movement and the people leaving these devastated areas.

I remember my mother, my grandparents, my aunts and uncles lived for a while in Kansas at the tail end of the Dust Bowl before they returned to Illinois, and the dust was so bad, so thick, that they tied a clothesline from the house to the barn.

So, my grandfather, after doing the chores and feeding the animals, could find the house. You couldn't see the house; it could just be out there. That's how much dust there was.

Farming techniques weren't great. That dust was the topsoil. It was blown away down the streams and the rivers into the Mississippi and out into the ocean, lost.

So, people had to go look for something else, and they were heading to California, thinking it was going to be the greatest of all places, and of course you can read about that.

Turned out okay for some, not for others.

The Grapes of Wrath, wrath.

"Wrath" is an intense emotional state of displeasure. Some of you have probably had it from time to time.

A state of intense emotional state of displeasure.

The phrase was taken by Steinbeck from where? A stanza of the Battle Hymn of the Republic, right?

And we've talked before about Julia Ward Howe and how she wrote the hymn. We'll go through there again, but she used that hymn, "the Battle Hymn of the Republic," and that phrase in the hymn, which became the theme song, if you will, for the abolitionist movement.

It became the song of the North. So many people know the Song of the South, Dixie, but the Song of the North was the Battle Hymn of the Republic because it was opposing slavery.

"My eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. He is trampling on the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored."

You've sung it many times. Where the grapes of wrath are stored, he hath loosed the faithful lightning of his terrible swift sword. His truth is marching on.

Now the inspiration for the hymn's title came from where? The Bible.

In this case, the Book of Revelations, and a lot of mainline Protestant pastors just don't preach on Revelations. It's just too wacky, and people don't understand it, and we tend to kind of skip over it.

But this came from Revelations chapter 14, verses 19 to 20.

"So, the angel swung his sickle, swung his sickle to the earth, and gathered the clusters of the vine of the earth, and threw them into the great wine press of the wrath of God."

In the case of the hymn, the words refer to the vengeance of God against the evil ways of humankind, namely slavery, the wrath of God.

Intriguing, if not surprising, but the idea comes from the Bible.

So, I hope you will take some of your journeys, your road trips, and ask yourself the question: What might I discover about myself, or about my faith, or about humanity in general, and have some fun on the trip.

I know some of you have bucket lists, and you're methodically working through them. That's great.

If you're not up to physical travel, there's all kinds of travel to do: read *The Grapes of Wrath*, go to the library, use your library card. There are all kinds of ways to travel.

And hopefully, as we do it, we move into some areas that may not always be that comfortable for us.

Many times we step back. No, I don't want to do that. I'm not going to say anything. I'm not going to do that.

No, I think the Gospel is calling us to move into those new territories. You have new friends. You know, new circles, new everything. Most of you have experienced that. It's very exciting out there.

That's what Jesus experienced in this difficult passage from the Gospel of Matthew. He learned, and the woman whose faith was so strong was received by Jesus in a generous way, and her daughter was healed that very day.

May you too be healed, Amen.