

Today's readings from Matthew¹ and Isaiah² bring into sharp focus some very hard questions.

Who gets to enter the Temple? That seems to be the question before the prophet Isaiah. Are some people to be stopped at the door? Is the Temple really a house of prayer for *all* people – or just for *some* people?

The Jewish community to whom Isaiah preached struggled with this question. *Was everyone welcome in the Temple?* The newly restored community in Jerusalem had strong voices that sought to restrict who could enter the Temple. Only people who knew the rules. People who knew how to behave properly. Those strong voices would have said something like “only people who are like us.”

Who is entitled to mercy? That seems to be the question that was before Matthew and his community when the Gospel was written. They must have been struggling with some of those same strong voices. Voices that spoke of who was worthy of mercy, and who was not.

As we try to live into the Kingdom of God here on the corner of San Jacinto and Texas Avenues, we also struggle with these same questions: *Is everyone entitled to mercy? Who gets to enter the Temple?*

There are strong voices in Houston today that are saying there are some who *are not* entitled to mercy. Who gets medical care? Who gets mental health assistance? Who gets a job? Who gets a place to live, or something to eat? When you get out of jail or prison, who really gets a chance to start a new life?

Many people, many programs and organizations, including the Cathedral, work on these issues. The thing we need to remember – the thing that the Canaanite woman helps to remind us – is that these are not questions of *issues*. These are questions of *real people*, with real lives.

People with names. Real people with real hopes, real disappointments, real dreams. Real people like the homeless who live on our block and come to our parish for help. Real people like the disabled and the sick who also come to our front door for help. Real people like the uninsured and undocumented families

in the East End who come to Cathedral Health Ministries for help. Real people like the young street people and working poor in the Montrose³ who come to the mobile health clinic for help.

In the past few weeks, I've heard these people, these real people – some of whom are adults, some of whom are teenagers, and some of whom are children – referred to as cattle, referred to as rats, and most recently, referred to as worthless human beings.

They were referred to as *cattle* at a recent Town Hall Meeting, convened to address the growing problem of homelessness in Montrose. Our mobile clinic is there two nights a week, providing primary medical and mental health care to anyone 18 years or younger. Other churches partner with us, and provide a meal to those who assemble on Thursday nights. At the Town Hall Meeting, a resident of that community, speaking against the presence of social service agencies in the neighborhood, drew a comparison between providing a meal to homeless people and feeding cattle.

You may have seen the recent articles in the Houston Chronicle about an infestation of rats in some downtown parking garages and city parks. Following the publication of one of those articles, a citizen assigned by City Council to work on the Montrose Homelessness Task Force, compared the homeless to *rats*.

And just this week, a monthly publication that serves the downtown community carried an op-ed piece, written by a *city police officer* who was present at the Town Hall meeting concerning the homeless and near-homeless teenagers in the gay neighborhood. In his article, he labeled all the homeless as *worthless human beings*.

Is everyone entitled to mercy?

We need to remember the Canaanite woman. Her cry for help may have been rejected two times. But finally she and her child were seen for the children of God that they are.

I'm afraid that we cannot ignore the question that is placed before us today by Isaiah: *Who gets to enter the Temple?*

I've only been a part of this community for one year. And as is the nature of all clergy, I won't be here for a very long time. When I meet people who have been at the Cathedral for 80 years– for 60 years – for 40 years or say for only or a mere 20 years or so – I'm reminded what short-timers all clergy really are. This is truly your church. Not ours.

Those of you with long histories here know far better than I that a downtown church must have open doors. You tell me that we always have had guests and visitors who live 'under the bridge' or 'on the bench' as we so often say.

As the economy and the structures of our society continue to place pressure on the homeless and the working poor, we will likely have even more guests and visitors from that population. I hope so.

This week, I invited some of the people who live on the porch of the old Compass building⁴ next door to come to church. They said they couldn't.

They said that that were afraid to come inside.

Are they afraid that they don't know the rules? Are they afraid that they don't know how to properly behave? Are they afraid that *we* care about things like that? *Do we* care about things like that?

I hope that they will come to church here someday. I hope that more of us will take the opportunity to walk down the sidewalk, and invite them inside. I hope that we continue to be the house of prayer for all people about which Isaiah dreamed.

In a few moments – we will come to God's table with outstretched hands. As we stand before that table, we all stand – each one of us – in the place of the Canaanite woman. *Son of David, have pity on me. Help me.*

Maybe for some, those words don't resonate with your own needs today. If that's what you believe, I've got two things to say to you: First, congratulations on having such a wonderful life; secondly, you are either fooling yourself, or you are lying to yourself.

But if you really can't say *Son of David, have pity on me. Help me.* for yourself

today, then maybe you can say those words in your heart for the street kids in Montrose.

Say *Son of David, have pity on me. Help me.* for the homeless and working poor here in downtown.

Say *Son of David, have pity on me. Help me.* for the destitute, for those who suffer from mental distress.

Say those words for someone who battles with the demons of addiction, or selfishness, or greed, or self-righteousness.

None of God's children are dogs.

None of God's children are cattle.

None of God's children are rats.

None of God's children are worthless human beings.

Have we created a society where children of God are called such things?

Son of David, have pity on *us*. Help *us*.

¹ Matthew 15:21-28

Jesus left Gennesaret and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." 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.

² Isaiah 56:1, 6-7

Thus says the LORD: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant – these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

³ Montrose is the well-known ‘gay neighborhood’ in Houston. Some folk, i.e., those of a less generous spirit, would automatically assume that all young people in Montrose who are counted among the homeless or working poor, are sex workers, drug addicts or dealers, or all three.

Cathedral Health Ministries operates a mobile medical and mental health clinic that is on duty in the Montrose area two nights a week. The clinic is also in operation each weekday, serving at five elementary schools in Houston ‘East End’ and at a low-income Spanish-language dominant neighborhood one other night each week.

⁴ Compass is an agency begun by the Cathedral over 20 years ago. It provides a variety of social services to the downtown homeless and working poor populations. While it has been ‘spun-off’ as a stand-alone agency, the Compass continues to operate on Cathedral property. In conjunction with the current redevelopment projects at the Cathedral, they have temporally relocated to another facility – thus the reference to the ‘old’ building. At the time of the sermon, the building was vacant and had become a sleeping porch for the homeless, the result being that some of the downtown homeless population did literally ‘live’ on Cathedral property.