

[PRAYER] As you might know already, I am the product of a mixed marriage. My father's family is about as Yankee as they get, and my mother's family is about as southern as they get. My mother's parents were the very first to settle in our northern states, and so, when we visited their home in Bloomfield, Connecticut, it was like entering a different world. Ma'am this, y'all that, grits and bacon, green vegetables cooked to a golden brown - that was a good thing, apparently - these were the order of the day, along with many stories of the south that my grandparents loved to share with me and my sister.

I loved my grandparents very much, and since both of our parents were only children, I was eager to meet my large extended family in Alabama and Louisiana. Finally, in April, 1963, we flew to Montgomery, Alabama, to meet some of them. It was a delight, but also a shock. I was not ready for the language and culture of racial division that were a very public part of southern culture. I had to adapt to the notion of relatives who I loved very much, and who appeared to be good Christians, using language and customs that seemed to be so very ugly.

It was only many years later that I discovered that my southern family's story had other sides. It was only later when I learned that, that very week in April, 1963, the week in which the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote a letter from a Birmingham jail to that city's clergy, my uncle, Richmond Flowers, was fighting for voting rights and civil rights as the newly elected Attorney General of the State of Alabama.

Richmond Flowers did not go looking for this fight. He had entered office believing in segregation, but he also believed that the law was the law, and that people's rights, promised to them by law, needed to be enforced. Richmond Flowers loved to help people, and he loved to do what was right. So, in the years ahead, in spite of bricks being thrown through his home's windows, night after night of cross burnings on his home's front lawn, threatening phone calls to his young children, in spite of being spat upon, punched in the face, and thrown down stairs, in spite of rejection by his church, relentless political and media attacks, and even incarceration, Richmond Flowers fought for the laws of our nation to be enforced justly. It turned out that my southern family ties were far more complicated than I had imagined.

I am sure that all of our families have rich and complicated family ties, with more wrinkles than we might care to remember or imagine, and more sides to their stories than we might be willing to tell, because a simple story is the best story sometimes, it seems. Yet, the story of humanity is complicated. The story of our family ties leads us all back to common ancestors, thousands and millions of years ago; but like the opening words of a long story, those ancient ancestors of ours could not imagine how their human story would turn out. Each of our lives is but a short few phrases in a long story that stretches across the ages, told from many angles, and retold, when we gain wisdom and perspective on the meaning of our lives. And in that wisdom, in that retelling, hopefully, we find the family ties that bind us to God's

greater truths: unity, love, and mercy.

Seeking the unity of love and mercy that God promises us as children in God's family is not easy for us to do. It was not even easy for Jesus, the Son of God, to do, in his ministries to people who needed God's unity love, and mercy so very much. In today's gospel story from Matthew 15, Jesus is yet again stretching the limits of what his disciples must do offer God's mercy. He has led them to the cities of Tyre and Sidon, deep into territory that was a foreign land to his disciples. Tyre and Sidon were two of the major cities of the Canaanites, the place where Jacob, the father of the tribes of Israel, had settled as a foreigner. In the time of Jesus there were still people of Jewish ancestry there, Israelites who Jesus wanted to touch with God's good news of healing and deliverance.

As Jesus tells us in today's story from Matthew, though, these Jews were a pale shadow of who they had been as God's people. In English, we see Jesus referring to these Jews as the "lost sheep of Israel," but in the original Greek text, the word "lost" really means "destroyed." Jesus was in Canaan to reach Jewish people whose faith in the God of Israel had been destroyed. They were so important to Jesus that Jesus didn't want the Canaanites to know that he was there, according to Mark's gospel. Jesus wanted to focus his disciples on helping to restore these Israelites to the grace and mercy of God's family.

But other people destroyed by this world also needed the power and mercy of Jesus desperately, putting aside everything that might have held them back. They put aside their prejudices, their cultural divides, their sense of self-righteousness, their pet causes, their political correctness, their family ties - anything that would divide them from the power and mercy of God.

And so it was that a Canaanite woman dared to approach Jesus, calling this foreign man Jesus her Lord, her master, and begged for God's mercy for her daughter, who was possessed by demons. Many of us may know how that mother felt. Many of us have loved ones, friends, and relatives, who have been possessed by the demons of alcoholism, addictions, and other things that prey on the souls of people today, demons that frighten families to the point that they have no hope left for them and their loved ones, but from God. And yet, like the Canaanite woman and the Jews of Canaan, approaching God for mercy and healing for many people is new to them. They doubt God's mercy, even though they know that they have no other choice but to turn to God.

The disciples of Jesus did not make it easy for this woman. They asked Jesus to send this woman away. Yet she persisted, and begged Jesus for mercy. Jesus tested her by saying that children in a family get fed before the family pets do. You see, Jesus included her in God's family, but his mission that day was to feed the destroyed faith of Israel's children. The woman understood this, but reminded Jesus that she was seeking only crumbs of mercy from the table of her family's master - Jesus himself. She was different from the Israelites, but equally entitled to God's mercy through her

family ties of faith, no matter what the cultural conventions of her times might have said about her status or importance. Jesus responded to her call for mercy, and removed the demons from her daughter without even visiting her. The woman's great faith, reaching out beyond her culture, led to great healing, salvation, and justice.

Being a Christian disciple is not easy. It means being dedicated to reclaiming those whose Christian faith has been destroyed, and it means reaching out to those whose values and culture seem foreign to us, for the sake of everyone's salvation in Christ. It means accepting that God will always double down on mercy, even when it seems like we couldn't possibly offer mercy, and trying to follow God's loving example. It means establishing family ties of love and unity where our prejudices would tell us that there are no family ties worth considering.

God's family ties of love and unity are bigger, deeper, and far more powerful than red, white and blue stripes, Confederate stripes, rainbow stripes, or any stripes of any human flag that our own view of culture may raise high as our own personal or collective ideal for humankind. There is only one flag under which God's story of salvation, mercy, unity, and healing can fly for those seeking God's mercy and grace - and that is the flag of Christ, the banner that defines our willingness to seek God's mercy for every human being on this planet, and to stretch our sense of mercy to the limits that Jesus himself defined in the nails of a cross on a lonely hill in Jerusalem, and in his liberation from a tomb in bright Easter sunlight.

It is this unity that this church, South Meriden Trinity United Methodist Church, must seek first and foremost for itself, and for our community. The homes around us, and our own homes, cry out for healing and hope. They beg for crumbs of mercy and grace. They seek liberation from demons of soul-destroying oppression, injustice, cruelty, and illness. They yearn for us to put aside our human preconceptions and to treat every person as being worthy of God's family ties through God's grace, without political or cultural ties that bind us to other things that can tear us away from God's unity. They ask us to persist, and to endure, and to grow, into a force for Christ on earth that is authentic, loving, and refusing to give up on faith, for the sake of God's salvation offered to us in Christ.

It is only in Christ, through God's Holy Spirit, that we can endure as a church to do this. It is only in Christ, through God's Holy Spirit, that we will forge the family ties that will bind us, and our world, together, to God's salvation. It is only in Christ, through God's Holy Spirit, that the world will know that we are Christians by our love. Blessed are the family ties that bind us together, in Christ. Amen.