

An Alternative to the Queen of Hearts
by Rev. Durrell Watkins, M.A., M.Div.
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Ephesians 1.11-14; Matthew 25.35-40

I told you once about the time I received an obscene phone call. The caller, breathing heavily, asked, "What are you wearing?" I said at once, "Not a thing since I came out of my girdle, it was cutting in me in half." Strangely that ended the conversation.

Well, it was actually my great-aunt Gladys who taught me how to handle that sort of situation. One day she got a terribly obscene phone call. The caller said he was coming over with a very naughty agenda. And then he said, "How would you like that, Sylvia?"

Aunt Gladys said, "Sylvia! My name isn't Sylvia, it's Gladys." The caller was mortified and said, "I am so sorry ma'am, I thought you were my wife.; I must have misdialed. We like to play little games like this; I'm so embarrassed." Aunt Gladys paused for a second and then said, "Does that mean you're not coming over?"

In contrast to my charming Aunt Gladys, in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, there is a volatile and unpleasant character known as the Queen of Hearts. It's funny that this sovereign should reign over Hearts, since her behavior is so consistently heartless. She isn't meant to encourage, affirm, or assist anyone. In fact, her role in the story is to serve as an obstacle to Alice .

The Queen is quick tempered and she doesn't believe in any sort of due process nor does she see any value in making sure that a punishment actually fits the crime one has committed. She isn't concerned with mitigating circumstances. She is much more prone to condemnation than to mercy. And her wrath is characterized by her famous and oft' repeated refrain, "Off with their heads."

Of course, the Queen of Hearts is a fictional character. Some have suggested that she was meant to be a caricature of Queen Victoria , but even so, as a literary character she isn't meant to represent the complexities of a real person. She is only angry, only petty, only vindictive, and only meant to be a challenge for Alice to navigate. She's not a very good queen, and she isn't even a very reasonable portrayal of a human-being; nor is she meant to be.

What I find sad, however, is that while we can see the pettiness of the Queen of Hearts and find ourselves perfectly aware of how ridiculous and unbelievable her pathological cruelty is, we all too often attribute the worst of her characteristics to God.

We call the Energy of Life, the universal Spirit, the Ground of Being "God," but we sometimes act as if this God is just a character, too vile and petty and miserable and unkind to be believable. We sing praises to God, while living in fear of the Queen of Hearts. One wonders if there is an alternative to this condition. Can God be experienced as something other than the rage-filled Queen of Hearts.

The writer of the book of Ephesians was once thought to be St. Paul , but now we have doubts. Nevertheless, Ephesians is part of our canon of scripture and the writer of that text tells us that God has been watching over us...not as an investigator trying to catch us in some questionable act, but rather as a loving presence that has always wanted only a glorious life for us.

That writer was one person, but not the only person from the early days of Christianity who believed that the heart of God was nothing like the Queen of Hearts.

In Matthew's gospel, which we have reflected on for at least 45 of the last 52 Sundays, we have also been hearing a much more inclusive, gracious, and hopeful message. The writer of Matthew's gospel offers us liberation from the Queen of Hearts image of the divine.

Matthew remembers that we are made in the image and likeness of God. That doesn't mean that God is limited by gender, or nationality, or human form. It does mean that our truest nature is divine; the divine source of life is one with all life, leaving nothing and no one out. WE are the children of God; and God never abandons any of her children for any reason.

Isn't that what Matthew has been saying all along? Matthew shows us Magi...practitioners of another religion from another culture and country. They find Jesus, celebrate him, and protect him...just as they are, without needing to be converted.

Matthew shows us a Canaanite woman. She is part of a group Jesus' community condemns, and the community has a biblical proof text from Deuteronomy to justify their condemnation. But in Matthew's story, the Canaanite woman is a person of sacred value, and she receives the miracle she is seeking. She is more important than their prejudicial reading of scripture!

Matthew shows us a Roman, pagan Centurion. He comes to Jesus on behalf of his servant...but the word Matthew uses for this servant suggests that he isn't merely an employee. The service he provides probably includes romance, and the Centurion is clearly very fond of him...fond enough to beg a Jewish faith-healer to somehow restore his health. In Matthew's Gospel, same-gender love can be blessed with the love of Christ.

Matthew tells us that Jesus teaches a life of spiritual integrity amounts to doing unto others as you would have them do unto you, and loving God with the wholeness of who you really are, and then loving not only yourself but also loving others as you love yourself. Love, respect, compassion...spiritual integrity is as simple as that.

And here we are again: Matthew being as clear as he knows how to be. He is telling us that we are all, without exception, the children of God, and when we treat others as if they are children of God then we are touching the divine idea, the perfect image, the Christ that we see not only in Jesus but in every child of God.

The Buddhists talk of the Buddha Nature inherent in all living beings. Vedanta teaches that a divine spark, or Atman dwells in every living being. Matthew is making the same point, but our Christian vocabulary calls that divine spark, that inward light, that perfect image, Christ.

Matthew is telling us that to follow Jesus and to be Christian isn't about what ideological opinion we're willing to fight for or who we are willing to exclude for being different.

Christianity isn't about protecting marriage and thereby privileging heterosexuality. Christianity isn't about calling on God to help us win wars that we could have avoided. Christianity isn't about believing a creed unquestionably and then insisting that everyone else accept our creed as well.

No, Matthew would have us see Christianity as remembering that we are all part of the world and we must respond to the world's needs.

We can't fix every problem, but we can care.

We can be aware. We can do something.

We can have compassion...Matthew calls us not to develop dogmatic certainty, but to develop compassion.

How have we ministered to Christ? When we showed compassion to the least of these, the brothers and sisters of the one we call Christ, we were honoring the divine love that we find in Jesus.

In the early church, the Jesus movement wasn't mainstream. They were on the margins, underground, and sometimes persecuted. Even in the peaceful times, they weren't the dominant group...not for a few hundred years anyway.

The Jesus Movement attracted women, children, pacifists, lepers, the elderly, the sick, the desperately poor, and people from a variety of ethnicities and cultures. And Matthew is having Jesus say that all of these different kinds of people are his brothers and sisters.

When we include, embrace, care about the one who has been marginalized, excluded, oppressed... we are ministering to the Christ Principle of that person's life, and to the Christ of our own being as well.

God isn't the Queen of Hearts saying have a narrow, limiting, divisive view or off with your head!

God is the presence of unconditional love that we see in such heroes as Jesus. Jesus isn't the dividing line to keep out those we don't understand or with whom we disagree; Jesus is the symbol that reminds us we are ALL children of God and we worship that God not by pretending to believe certain things about one of God's children, but by following Jesus' example of treating all people as if they are God's children.

Matthew sees Jesus not as a conquering general, but as an including, healing presence. The Jesus of the gospels is the rejected, persecuted, marginalized, servant-leader whose divine dignity can't be limited by any oppressive act and who can't be silenced even by execution.

Jesus isn't the powerful oppressor, he's the child of God who can't be defeated by oppression, because he's too full of the life of God; and what's more, he isn't the exception, he is the rule! He is the demonstration that the life of God is in each of us and it is indestructible. Isn't that what Resurrection means?

We can all be more generous, kinder, more committed to peace, more welcoming of the stranger, the new comer, the different. And I bet most of us are working on it.

But what we need to remember, is that we aren't working on becoming children of God, because that's already settled.

We are working on recognizing everyone else as children of God.

When we can believe that God's love excludes no one for any reason, then we will naturally live out that belief by visiting the lonely or praying for the sick or giving money to good causes or

inviting more kinds of people into our lives. As we do that, we embrace more of our divine potential, and the Christ in us becomes the reigning principle of our lives; and within the Reign of Christ, we discover, we embrace, and we share divine love with everyone. This is the alternative to the Queen of Hearts, and this is the good news! Amen.

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I am a child of God.
I am made in God's image.
I am filled with God's love.
And what is true for me, is true for everyone.
I see the light of God in all people.
In God's presence, we are all blessed.
Amen.