

“Show Me Mercy”
Matthew 15:10-28
Pollocksville Presbyterian Church
Sermon #66
11th Sunday After Pentecost
22nd Sunday in the COVID-19 Pandemic
8.16.20

Matthew 15:10-28

10 Jesus called the crowd near and said to them, “Listen and understand.**11** It’s not what goes into the mouth that contaminates a person in God’s sight. It’s what comes out of the mouth that contaminates the person.”

12 Then the disciples came and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended by what you just said?”

13 Jesus replied, “Every plant that my heavenly Father didn’t plant will be pulled up. **14** Leave the Pharisees alone. They are blind people who are guides to blind people. But if a blind person leads another blind person, they will both fall into a ditch.”

15 Then Peter spoke up, “Explain this riddle to us.”

16 Jesus said, “Don’t you understand yet? **17** Don’t you know that everything that goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes out into the sewer?**18** But what goes out of the mouth comes from the heart. And that’s what contaminates a person in God’s sight. **19** Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adultery, sexual sins, thefts, false testimonies, and insults. **20** These contaminate a person in God’s sight. But eating without washing hands doesn’t contaminate in God’s sight.”

21 From there, Jesus went to the regions of Tyre and Sidon. **22** A Canaanite woman from those territories came out and shouted, “Show me mercy, Son of David. My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession.” **23** But he didn’t respond to her at all.

His disciples came and urged him, "Send her away; she keeps shouting out after us."

24 Jesus replied, "I've been sent only to the lost sheep, the people of Israel."

25 But she knelt before him and said, "Lord, help me."

26 He replied, "It is not good to take the children's bread and toss it to dogs."

27 She said, "Yes, Lord. But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall off their masters' table."

28 Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith. It will be just as you wish." And right then her daughter was healed.

The Word of the LORD. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Two separate scenarios. Both mention food. Both scenarios demonstrate how angry insiders become when their way of life is upended by change. It's not only the Pharisees' offense by Jesus' remarks in verse 11 about food and the heart. The disciples are offended by a Canaanite woman bothering them because her daughter is suffering from demon possession. Yet, the Canaanite woman who should be the most offended by the disciples' actions

and Jesus' remarks presses on. So, naturally, they tell Jesus to send her away.....she's a nuisance. In both scenarios, the circle is widened. The walls that were built to keep "them" the outsiders from "us" the insiders come tumbling down.

No wonder the Pharisees and the disciples are offended. Please note it's not just the Pharisees, it's the disciples, too. People who were used to a way of life, people who were used to being the insiders, people used to calling the shots, and their way is threatened by Jesus' inclusivity and his redefining of purity.

In Matthew 15:10-20, Jesus is teaching the crowd. For this Jewish audience and for these Jewish readers/listeners of Matthew, they

are acutely aware of the Pharisaic cleansing rituals to set themselves apart from their Gentile occupiers, the Romans. And as an aside, please let me reiterate: When Pharisees or any other Jewish religious officials are the antagonists in the Gospels, the author is making a caricature out of them to make a point. For us, it's easy to demonize the Scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees and that can lead us into the slippery slope of anti-semitism. Many of the religious officials had to walk a fine line under an occupying force in the 1st century world. Some looked like collaborators while others, like the Pharisees, had to promote and teach purity to set themselves apart from the Gentiles.

Right here in Matthew 15:10-20, Jesus has offended the Pharisees.

At least, that's what the disciples are saying, who will also become

offended later in the scripture. Jesus' offensive statement is verse 11: "It's not what goes into the mouth that contaminates a person, it's what comes out of the mouth."

Of course, Jesus doesn't care if they're offended or not. Rather, he gets more explicit in verses 13-14. Jesus admits his authority as God's Son, declares that God will judge everyone at the end of time, and the Pharisees are spiritually blind people leading other spiritually blind people who will fall into a ditch that looks and sounds suspiciously familiar to a grave. So, yes, the religious officials are offended because Jesus doubles down on his attacks and he's shaking up the status quo as he's prone to do.

Peter needs clarification. “Explain this riddle to us.” Jesus questions the disciples’ weak faith: “Don’t you understand yet?” It’s not what goes in the mouth and into the sewers, it’s what comes from the heart and out of the mouth. Jesus continues in verse 20 that it’s not the washing of your hands that determines if you’re clean, it’s your spiritual state. If your heart is full of evil thoughts and your mouth spews those thoughts and you act on those thoughts, you are contaminated.

In other words, what you do reflects what’s in your heart. Simply observing the intricate ritual of handwashing doesn’t determine a person’s spiritual state. Jesus expands the circle that had been pretty small and, rightly so, in order to set the Jewish people apart from the occupying force that worshipped false gods. But, now, as

a fulfiller of the Law and the Prophets, God's grace is freely given to a lot more people than anyone can ever imagine.

It's not until Matthew 15:21-28 that we get a true test of how far this circle is to be expanded. A Canaanite woman, the lowest of the low in 1st century society, does everything she can to get Jesus' attention. Her daughter is plagued with demons and she needs healing! Ignore this woman and she'll go away. Maybe if we cross the street and avoid her, she won't approach us any more. Maybe if we get Jesus to send her away, we won't be uncomfortable any more. Oh! Jesus just insulted that woman by calling her a dog. That'll teach her to shut up. Surely she'll go away now!

In case you haven't noticed, women do not go away quietly in the Bible. This woman persists even more regardless of avoidance and racial slurs. Her daughter needs healing and she'll do whatever it takes to make her daughter better. The Canaanite woman is on her knees begging for help and says: "Yes, Lord. But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall off their masters' table."

Honestly, I don't know if Jesus' harsh words to the woman were a test of her faith or if he truly felt that way. Possibly, he's using this as a test of her faith and to prove a point to the disciples that their faith is dwarfed by this woman's faith. And that is where the most offensive, but truthful statement occurs: An outsider has more faith than the insiders. And at this moment, the circle is expanded not only to include those who practice the hand washing ritual, but

also this Canaanite woman and others like her: Canaanites.

Gentiles. Outsiders.

How many of us have been offended when the circle was expanded to include “them”? How many of us have been offended when someone lovingly, but firmly, pointed out where we were wrong?

How many of us have felt the “insider/outsider” tension in situations? This Canaanite woman was told by Jesus that she had great faith, right after he questioned the disciples’ faith several verses before in 15:16 and his offending the Pharisees before that.

This woman, one of two non-Jews to be described in Matthew’s Gospel, is described as having a great faith. She represents the

people today who have been shut out of churches simply because of status, ethnicity, skin color, sexual orientation, sexual identity, and ability. An outsider of outsiders in the 1st century world is told by the Savior of the world that she has great faith, greater than the insiders. A woman was shut out and Jesus boldly expanded the circle and it offended a lot of people.

Expanding the circle is not easy. It can be painful and there can be lots of pushback from those who benefited from the smaller circle. But, our Savior shows us a better way. The Holy Spirit inflicts dis-ease in our hearts and minds at the way things are and works through us to show that same radical inclusion Jesus showed to the Canaanite woman.

Our final hymn we'll sing today, "Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound", was written by John Newton. He was involved in the African Slave Trade in the 18th century. His circle was rather small, so small that some people based on their skin color and country of origin were not considered people. Yet, by the 1750s, the Holy Spirit worked on John Newton who gave up the slave trade and joined the Abolitionist Movement. Later, Newton was ordained in the Church of England, which he served as a priest for around 40 years. "Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound" is just one of the many hymns he wrote that have continued to be sung in the church hundreds of years later.

If Jesus can expand the circle while risking offending insiders and the Holy Spirit can work on former slave traders like John Newton

who follow Jesus' example to expand the circle, who are the people
the Holy Spirit is showing us to include inside our circles today?

Beloved, believe this Good News!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Amen.