

## Sermon on **Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28**

For All Saints Millington

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In today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew we hear two stories of Jesus: The first is his response to the criticism of the Pharisees and then the next is his encounter with the Canaanite woman in which he heals her daughter. In both of these stories, Jesus models to us how we, as his followers, should behave.

Both stories take place at the end of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, and before he proceeds to Jerusalem for the final conclusion of his ministry on earth. Things are heating up with the temple authorities and the disciples are getting nervous.

Jesus preaches to the crowd "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." and his disciples ask him afterwards: "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?"

Jesus replies: "Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." He's basically saying here, "Consider the source." If the Pharisees tell you to strictly obey all the intricate law codes, and the purification rituals, and dietary restrictions of our Jewish faith, ask yourself if they themselves are above reproach.

He says to his disciples: "Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

Jesus' point here is something that I think most of us can relate to. How many times have we seen religious leaders dictate from on high how the faithful should live their lives, while they

practice dishonest and cruel behaviors in their own lives. Even with leaders who are non-believers, we sometimes see people who seem to care deeply about saving the world, working diligently for global justice, and yet they exact unfair and abusive behavior on their colleagues and loved ones.

In this conflict with the Pharisees, Jesus models something that we can learn from: critical thinking. Instead of blindly following our leaders, we need to ask our leaders and ourselves as Jesus did: “How do you treat people? Do you practice what you preach?”

Jesus models a behavior in his ministry that does not look like a compliant doormat, always meek and silent. He courageously addresses problems with logic and reason. Even when his words fall on deaf ears, he knows that someone is listening and learning. He does not model violent or enraged behavior in his opposition to unfairness, either, but rather a steadfast and plain speaking of truth to power. He looks beyond the rules written on scrolls and exhorts the faithful to practice the foundations of kindness and charity upon which the rules were written.

In the second story, where the Canaanite woman begs Jesus to heal her daughter from a demon, it seems on the surface that Jesus is not exactly modeling good behavior for us. He says, after the woman humbly begs him for help: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

When we encounter scripture, it is extremely important to take notice of anything that feels uncomfortable. A critical mind is essential to having an honest relationship with the Bible. This story makes us uncomfortable, and that is a valuable and helpful response.

Scottish Baptist minister Alexander MacLaren says of this uncomfortable moment: “From the lips accustomed to drop oil and wine into every wound, came words like swords, cold, unfeeling, keen-edged, fitted and meant to lacerate...His refusal was a real refusal, founded on the divine decree, which He was bound to obey. His words to her, harsh as they unquestionably sound, are but another way of putting the limitation on which He had just insisted in His answer

to the disciples. The ‘bread’ is the blessing which He, as the sent of God, brings; the ‘children’ are the ‘lost sheep of the house of Israel’; the ‘dogs’ are the Gentile world. The meaning of the whole is simply the necessary restriction of His personal activity to the chosen nation. It is not meant to wound nor to insult, though, no doubt, it is cast in a form which might have been offensive, and would have repelled a less determined or less sorrowful heart.”

But Jesus, as God incarnate, knows how this conversation is going to end. He knows that his seemingly harsh words remind this Canaanite woman that she is an outsider – as ritually unclean as a dog. She is a non-Jew, a representative of the nations that have been enemies of Israel for many generations. Jesus is testing her faith in him, which is extraordinary considering that she is a pagan. She answers him, as he knows she will, and humbly asks for the crumbs of his banquet with the chosen people. She wants anything she can get from this God who heals and transforms.

Jesus models here a behavior that breaks the strict rules of the Jewish law and considers instead what lies beneath the surface of this pagan woman. To human eyes she is an enemy, unclean, and unworthy of the gifts of the God of the Jews. But God sees beyond the surface of every human being and knows our hearts. Jesus knows the heart of this woman and sees only the love she has for her daughter, her humility, and her faith. He says to her “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And he instantly heals her daughter.

Jesus asks us to look beyond the surface of our fellow human beings and see their hearts. How do we treat people? Do we practice what we preach? What kind of an example is our church to the world? Do we follow Jesus’ example of compassion and healing – of welcoming and loving those who are our enemies? Do we speak truth to power and follow our baptismal covenant to “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?”

It's a tall order, and we often fail. But like Jesus, we keep trying even in the face of tremendous opposition.

Our collect for today reminds us that God has given Jesus to us as “an example of godly life” and asks for the grace to “follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life.”

Let us never forget to look to the person of Jesus as we plot the course of our actions and to look to him as an example of how we treat people and how we practice what we preach.