

Matthew 15:10-28

Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, ‘Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.’ Then the disciples approached and said to him, ‘Do you know that the Pharisees took offence when they heard what you said?’ He answered, ‘Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.’ But Peter said to him, ‘Explain this parable to us.’ Then he said, ‘Are you also still without understanding? 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 left that place 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.

Sermon

This is one of those scriptures that we don’t read in the church very often.

One of the reasons for that, I’m sure, is that there’s some pretty spicy language in it. There’s some name calling, and offense is taken, and Jesus even gets some potty humor in, which is always fun. But, I think there might be another reason we don’t read it so much. Because in this passage Jesus presents a difficult teaching for the church.

He starts off with an easy lesson, pointed toward an easy target, when he preaches to the Pharisees. Because it’s always easier to preach to someone else, isn’t it? It’s always easier to point out the speck in someone else’s eye than it is to see the log in your own?

You see, the Pharisees had created some traditions, to try and protect their sanctity, their holiness. Because, who doesn’t want to be holy, after all? But, Jesus proclaims that their traditions are nothing more than a weak attempt to take the power over what is holy away from

God, and claim it for themselves. He points out the ways that their concern over maintaining their own holiness actually makes them less holy in God's eyes.

- When they exclude people who are "ritually unclean" from their table and their home they do so because they don't want to "defile themselves." But, Jesus says it is actually this act of exclusion that defiles them. It is this focus only on themselves, and unwillingness to invite others in if they don't follow all their traditions, that actually threatens the Pharisees' holiness in God's eyes. Because that selfishness stands in the way of God's call to mercy and hospitality, sharing and grace.

So far, so good, right? That's a great sermon Jesus preaches to those Pharisees, isn't it? It sounds like it comes straight from God.

But, here is where the scripture gets a little tougher, because Jesus' beautiful sermon doesn't end there. Only now, as they move on to Tyre and Sidon, someone else begins to preach it.

A Canaanite woman comes running up to them shouting about demons and sick kids. She's causing a ruckus. And everyone knows that Canaanites are certainly not a holy people. These are the folks who lived in the promised land before the Jews got there after all. They have different customs and different traditions and different religion. They are the enemy. This is certainly not the kind of person that the Pharisees would have wanted to invite to their table if they wanted to keep it holy and pure.

- And it almost seems like something from those Pharisees has rubbed off on Jesus and the disciples. Because they respond just as you might imagine the Pharisees would have responded. The disciples want to send her away. Jesus refuses to speak to her. He comes up with excuses for keeping his distance.
- But she keeps God's sermon going. She expresses deep faith, coming to Christ in her need and saying, "Lord, help me."
- And Jesus seems to try to push her away from his table. He says "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Is he calling her a dog while he refuses to help her? That doesn't sound like the Jesus I have come to know. That sounds more like those Pharisees who criticize the disciples for not following all their traditions before they go to eat.
- But, thanks be to God, the sermon goes on. And she responds, saying, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."
- And hearing that sermon once again - that same sermon he had just preached to the Pharisees - that good word that reminds us that "it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles, but what comes out." Jesus seems to remember who he is. He seems to recognize that, like any good sermon, the message was true for the preacher as well.

- And this sermon does its work in Jesus too, as he turns toward the Canaanite woman, to recognize the faith that she has shown, to heal her daughter, and to restore the relationship that God wills for us to have, even with our enemies, even with those we might call unholy and unclean.

Because it's easy to tell our neighbor to have greater compassion. It's easy to criticize the traditions of others and call them to greater faithfulness.

But, every time we do, let us also commit ourselves to the more difficult work, of *hearing* the sermon we preach. Of seeing the way that *we* could do better. Of transforming *our* words from words of concern for ourselves - to words of concern for our neighbors in need.

Because we can all be more welcoming. We can all be more faithful. We can all seek greater compassion and mercy for those around us. We all have ways that we can grow toward the kingdom that God is building amongst us.

So let us trust the one who gives us the growth. Let us trust those good words that keep on coming to us, whether they come out of the mouths of Jesus or our enemies. If they are truly the words of God, let us hear them and be changed, ever more, into who God would have us be. So that we too might show compassion. So that we too might receive the blessing and the healing that we need.

So that we too might be made holy, by the Holy Word of God. Amen.

This sermon was first shared with Aurora First Presbyterian Church, by Rev. Doug Friesema. To receive future communications from the church, please contact:

firstauroraoffice@gmail.com

(303) 364-2609

1585 Kingston St.
Aurora, CO 80010

Aurorafpchurch.com

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