

Willow River Parish—Clear Lake, Deer Park, Forest United Methodist

Matthew 15:10-20

Jesus called the crowd near and said to them, “Listen and understand. 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.”

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

Jesus replied, “Every plant that my heavenly Father didn’t plant will be pulled up. 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.”

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

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

1. Apprentice

In 1797, prominent German author Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote a poem called “Der Zauberlehrling,” in which an apprentice of a master sorcerer is left alone with chores to do. Invoking magic that he was not yet properly trained to use, the apprentice commanded a bucket and broom to do his work. Because he could not properly control them, everything got quickly out of hand, and chaos ensued. Finally, the master returned and restored order to the mess. Walt Disney famously employed the plot of the

poem in his musical “Fantasia,” starring Mickey Mouse as the Sorcerer’s Apprentice.”

While we laugh at the apprentice’s antics and enjoy the presentation, this fantasized idea of the role of “apprentice” may affect our idea of discipleship more than we realize. In our faith journey, we often think of ourselves as out there on our own doing our best to deal with situations out of our control. But this is not the kind of “discipleship” or “apprenticeship” relationship that Jesus expected from His disciples in His lifetime, nor is it the one He expects from us in ours.

In Jesus’ time, a disciple or apprentice to the faith was much like an apprentice in any other kind of learned skilled labor. You didn’t learn and then quickly strike out on your own. But a discipleship relationship was a years long endeavor, which involved literally following the rabbi every move, listening to him talk, watching him interact with others, listening and asking questions as he taught, sleeping, eating, and learning every hour of every day by his side. If you were a carpenter’s apprentice, you ate, slept, and worked side by side with the master carpenter. If you were a builder’s apprentice, you ate, slept, and worked side by side with the master builder. If you were an apprentice of the faith, you ate, slept, and learned/interacted side by side with the master rabbi.

So it was with Jesus and His disciples.

2. **Jesus Says**

The disciples walked with Jesus every day. They talked with Him, they slept as a group, and they learned and interacted with Jesus.

In today’s reading, Jesus was teaching about what contaminated people. Jewish teaching of the time had very strict rules of what a person could and

could not eat. They had a strict ritual of washing hands and body. They had other strict rules that needed to be followed, and the breaking of any of these rules made a person ritually unclean. They were contaminated.

Jesus said that none of that was true as far as God was concerned. God was more concerned with the cleanliness of a person's heart rather than the body. The state of a person's heart cause possible negative actions to come from a person. Those actions are what contaminate a person.

Just in case the people were confused, Jesus named some of the actions: evil thoughts, murders, adultery, sexual sins, thefts, false testimonies, and insults. Jesus was very specific.

Now, of course, Jesus offended the Pharisees. Jesus was always offending the Pharisees. Jesus told the disciples not to worry about the Pharisees—to leave them alone. They are blind spiritually.

3. Clean and Unclean

This discussion about things clean and unclean follows a skirmish between Jesus and the Pharisees over ritual hand-washing. Surely there had been a time when all (or most) of the Pharisees' rituals brought them closer to God and pointed to an inward reality. But from Jesus' comments, it appears that these rituals had lost their ability to effect change in the lives of those who were observing them.

This episode raises questions about the observance of rituals in the twenty-first century church. What makes rituals meaningful, and when should they be observed? Ideally, rituals are a dramatization of what has already happened in our lives, or what we pray will happen in our lives. Seen in this light, baptism, in certain Christian traditions, is a dramatization of an inward reality—the presence of God's saving grace in our lives through Jesus Christ. In worship, bowed heads or kneeling express humility and submission

to God. Ritual does its best work when the worshiping community understands why it engages in ritual action, or when the action itself suggests the reason.

By the time of Christ, Pharisee rituals had changed from an aid to worship and discipleship into a tool of power and control. The Pharisees used their rituals to judge others. Those who did them well were in and those who did them poorly (or ignored their rituals altogether) were excluded and condemned.

Jesus' harsh commentary calls us back to the reason for the ritual in the first place—spiritual transformation. God is looking not at what goes into the mouth, but at what comes out of the mouth. The most important thing is not process or ritual, it is result.

4. **What Happens Next**

After this teaching, something happens that challenges this teaching.

Jesus and the disciples went into the regions of Tyre and Sidon. They were met by a Canaanite woman. Her daughter was possessed by a demon, and she wanted Jesus to heal her daughter.

Jesus' response is almost cruel. He said he had been sent only to the people of Israel. He says it is not good to take the children's bread and give it to the dogs. After having just taught that what comes out of us is what contaminates us, this seems pretty contaminating.

I believe that Jesus knew all along what he was going to do. I believe that he was just testing this woman. When she responded with "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall off their master's table." She didn't respond with

anger. Her daughter's health was most important. She persevered, and Jesus responded by healing her daughter. It was her faith that caused Jesus to act.

5. **The Woman**

Think about the spectacle of this Canaanite woman throwing herself at the feet of Jesus. To even approach Jesus, she has broken several taboos. She is a Gentile approaching a Jew, a woman approaching a group of men in a gender-separated society, an outside Canaanite. Maybe we can better understand Jesus' original response when He refers to her as a dog. There is no getting around the fact that Jesus has just "dissed" her. Jews considered dogs to be unclean scavengers. Every reference to dogs in the Bible is negative.

For a moment she is turned away by a great spiritual leader, which must feel like being turned away by God. That's why it is so hard when our feelings get hurt in church. We expect to experience the sacred grace of God when we come to church, and if we are hurt or overlooked for the moment, it affects our core spirit. Where else will we find the sacred in our lives? This is what disturbs us in this episode. How can Jesus compare anyone to a dog or say a thing like that? The story hits us in a place of fear that maybe God finds us to be really annoying. We don't belong, others are more important.

The great thing about the Canaanite woman is that she seems unfazed by everything working against her. This woman understands the power of God's grace, for she believes so much that she knows a crumb from Jesus will suffice. This unnamed woman gives us a wonderful example of how to approach God with both humility and boldness, a grounded trust in God's grace despite all the human obstacles that stand in the way of relationship.

6. Epitaph

What would you think if I told you that on your tombstone would be inscribed a four-word epitaph? You might respond it would depend on who would write this epitaph—an enemy or a loved one. It might also depend, you might say, on how well this person knew and understood you. If a newspaper critic wrote of a concert pianist the four words: “He was a failure,” you could always say: That was his opinion. But if one of the worlds greatest musicians wrote, “He was a genius,” then you are apt to take the remark more seriously.

The Canaanite woman could be described with these four words: Great is your faith. She was a Canaanite woman who came from a country that was hostile to the Jews. She was presumably married, she had at least one child; but that’s all we know about her. We don’t know whether she was a good woman or a bad woman. We don’t know her name. All we know of her is that in this single encounter with Jesus He spoke to her these four words: Great is your faith.

Only four words but they are enough to make her immortal. We can trust these words as being true because the expert on faith spoke them. Jesus searched for faith, as a gem collector would fine jewels. He did not always find it in His disciples. On no occasion that we know of did He ever say of Peter, James, and John: Great is your faith. More often the words He spoke to them: You of little faith. On only one other occasion did Jesus praise a person for their faith. Interestingly, that was a Roman soldier stationed in Capernaum.

We regard this Canaanite woman with more than just an academic interest. She awakens in us a feeling of admiration, perhaps even envy, because she stands where most of us would like to stand. What faithful Christian would not like it said of him or her: Great is your faith. Think of

what it would mean if an aspiring young artist had Picasso place his hand on his shoulder and say: You have a great talent. How wonderful it would be then to a believer in God, if Jesus would place His hand on our shoulder and say: You have a remarkable talent for faith.

7. **Mother**

There is nothing on earth as potent, tenacious, and determined as a mother pleading on behalf of her child. This Canaanite woman cries out to Jesus to save her daughter. This encounter brings centuries of history and conflict into the dialogue. It becomes more than just a conversation between a healer and one who wishes healing. It is about the indigenous people of Canaan and their displacement by the Hebrews at God's command. The mother begins by calling Jesus "Son of David." By using this title, she implicitly acknowledges the importance of the Jews in the divine plan of salvation. Jesus does not respond the way she wants. This mother does not give up. She will cross boundaries of animosity and cultural mores to save her daughter from the demons that bind her. Approaching Jesus a second time, she assumes a posture of desperate submission as she kneels before Him and once again asks for help.

Jesus first response is not the inclusive, open Jesus we know who eats with sinners, forgives the unforgivable, and heals the unworthy. It is not the Jesus who commands us to love our neighbors and our enemies as ourselves. This rather rude Jesus is not the Jesus this Canaanite woman was expecting to find.

Still, she holds her ground. She is not asking for a place at the table, only to partake in a small fraction of the feast—the leftovers forgotten beneath it.

As I earlier stated, I believe Jesus was just testing this woman. Her perseverance paid off—and Jesus healed her daughter as she asked.

8. Conclusions

A family of five was enjoying their day at the beach. In the distance a little old lady appeared. Her gray hair was blowing in the wind and her clothes were dirty and ragged. She was muttering something to herself as she picked up things from the beach and put them into a bag. As she passed the family, she smiled. Her greeting was not returned.

Later this family learned that the old lady was a retired teacher who'd made it her lifelong crusade to pick up bits of glass from the beach so children wouldn't cut their feet. As she picked up the glass, she prayed for the people who had dropped it, even though she didn't know who they were.

Jesus Christ gave His life on the cross so that we might know the love, forgiveness and acceptance of God. Jesus died for each of us personally. We can't look at another human being without thinking to ourselves, Jesus died for them, too. We do a disservice when we jump to conclusions about people because of how they look, where they live or the type of work they do. We are all equal in Jesus' eyes.