

A Sermon for the 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost August 16, 2020

*Jesus 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 offense 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. Matthew 15: 10-28*

There is a prayer called the Collect for Purity that we say at the beginning of worship, when we use the liturgy for Holy Eucharist. Some of us know this prayer by heart.

*Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

It's a beautiful and powerful prayer. It reminds us that God knows the secrets of our hearts and it makes clear that we cannot love God and worthily magnify God's holy name if our hearts are not clean and pure, hence the name – Collect for Purity. We cannot cleanse our own hearts. God does that through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And what a relief that is because we are not always very good housekeepers of the heart.

In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus is confronted by the Pharisees and Scribes, who had earlier accused the disciples of not washing their hands before eating. It's helpful to know that this purity law, and many others, did not come down the mountain with Moses but were added later by Pharisees who were more concerned with outward appearances than with true inner holiness. It seems the Pharisees and Scribes didn't realize that judging others who do things differently was actually defiling their hearts, that their adherence to some old rituals that had been passed down might be closing their hearts to the possibility of God's grace and newness of life.

Our text picks up with Jesus explaining to the crowd that it's not what goes into the mouth that defiles or makes one unclean, but rather it's what comes out of the mouth that is unclean. That is to say that our words can defile. He notes that what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and if the heart is not pure, is not clean, then what comes out is going to defile everything it touches. So, the Collect for Purity is a really good prayer to pray for our hearts!

Jesus then has an opportunity to practice what he's just preached, when he encounters the Canaanite Woman. I'd like to think he was just in a bad mood, tired from all the confrontation and travel, teaching and healing, and needed some alone time. I know I get grumpy when I need some alone time!

This encounter quickly becomes a challenging discussion about rights, about who is entitled to what, about who is deserving or not deserving of healing. And Jesus is, let's face it, unkind to the Canaanite Woman. First, he ignores her, then he as good as calls her a dog, as good as tells her she is not welcome at the table. I don't know about you, but I find myself really uncomfortable as Jesus excludes this woman. The Jesus I know and love does not exclude. The Jesus I know eats with tax collectors and sinners, touches lepers, and heals the outcasts. What's going on here?

This encounter reminds us that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. That's the meaning of Incarnation. Being fully human, Jesus learns and develops—just as we do throughout our lives. Luke 2:52 says that as Jesus grew up he “increased in wisdom and in years.” Jesus at first responded to the Canaanite Woman in his full humanity. We all know something about full humanity.

Most of us, at times, let our personal prejudices and opinions rule our responses. Just yesterday I caught myself in an unkind response when someone cut in front of me in traffic – I'm tired and worried about what's happening in our world – that's what I told myself. But really, I am always judging other drivers. It's pretty much a running dialogue when I'm driving on Interstate 95!

And then, there are the headlines we read or hear each day. They can be triggers for our full humanity to come roaring out to weigh in and pass judgment. We all live out of our own experiences throughout life and those experiences shape us and generate our reactions, which can sometimes be all too human. Also, it can be hard for us to see some new possibility outside of our own frames of reference. When people act on their built in prejudices and personal opinions, when their fear and anger become fires fanned by the media, more discord and conflict are inevitable. Our hearts need cleansing.

In their prejudice the disciples, and even Jesus, at first saw the Canaanite Woman as “other”, as less than deserving, as a nuisance. As a Canaanite she was seen as impure, meaning that it would be sinful for righteous Jews to associate with her.

And yet, this determined woman kneels before him begging for mercy, reminding Jesus that even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.

This woman, living in the reality of being excluded, seen as less than, due to both race and gender, and living in the painful reality of her daughter's mental illness – this woman knows something about Jesus. She knows that he is the Son of David, which is Israel's phrase for the Messiah, the anointed one, the Savior.

The Canaanite Woman teaches Jesus something new about the Kingdom; that what we call rights, what we call our righteousness, are ultimately gifts from God. Jesus finds himself learning something about the wideness of God's mercy, and he is changed. And in his incarnation, Jesus models for us how we too can be changed.

Jesus has exemplified for us how to let our judgments, assumptions, and handed-down behaviors be changed. Are we allowing the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to cleanse our hearts and gift us with true righteousness? May we offer our hearts – our broken hearts, our hardened hearts, our raging hearts – to God who will cleanse them, who will make them pure. Then the actions that follow will put the words of the Gospel into motion, sharing God's mercy with all in need of healing.

Amen.