

What Defiles?

Matthew 15:10-28

¹⁰Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand: ¹¹it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” ¹²Then the disciples approached and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?” ¹³He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.” ¹⁵But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.” ¹⁶Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

²¹Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²²Just 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.” ²³But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” ²⁴He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” ²⁵But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” ²⁶He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” ²⁷She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” ²⁸Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

An “interesting” text. I guess that’s the best way of putting it. This is one of those lectionary texts that preachers intentionally skip. No one, no one wants to preach a sermon on a text in which Jesus isn’t acting Jesusy. And yes, believe it or not, Jesusy is an actual word. An adjective to describe someone who is acting religious. So again, no one wants to preach on a text in which Jesus himself is not acting like a religious person. I’m indebted to Travis for switching Sunday’s with me on Thursday afternoon so I get this prestigious honor this morning. :)

We’ve been following Jesus through crowds recently, and this text begins the same way. He tells them simply that it is not what goes into the mouth that makes us unclean or foul, but what comes out of the mouth that determines if our heart is pure. But Peter doesn’t get it. He wants Jesus to explain it to him, and that’s when Jesus begins to lose his cool.

We all lose our cool from time to time. This text reminds me of when I've spent too much time around my kids. Kids are great, but they still have so much to learn. Their brains are still developing and they are still trying to figure out how the world works. So on occasion, every day, they'll say something that doesn't quite make sense. They will try to make it make sense, but they just don't have it all figured out just yet and by the time you've heard twenty of these things that don't quite make sense, you start to lose your cool. You almost want to turn the odd questions back on them so they see for themselves how odd the logic really is. I admit, I've used that tactic before and I'm sure I will use it again. There are times when kids need to listen and really hear the question or assumption that they are making to realize their assumption isn't quite right.

I can't help but wonder if that's what Jesus is doing here. He explains to the crowd that these rules of purity they live by are not what makes them pure of heart. The many, many rules they live by from washing of hands, to what meat they can eat, to when they can touch foods, to how to prepare the meal, is not what makes them pure. It is not what enters the mouth that makes the soul pure. Everything that enters the mouth has the same fate, the sewer. Clean or unclean, it will be expelled just the same.

Jesus, in his typical Jesusy fashion, turns their rules upside down, and declares that what comes from a person's mouth is what shows the purity of their heart. Not what they are given, but how they respond to what they've been given. For it's our words that have meaning. It's our words that affect people. Our words, big or small, are what people remember about us. They define our true selves. They show the purity of our heart and the intentions of our soul.

Hoping that Peter and the crowds understood what he was saying, that simply following the rules didn't make you a religious person, that it's deeper than that, Jesus heads on to Tyre and Sidon. Once they are there, a Canaanite woman from the area began yelling at Jesus. Have mercy on me, Son of David, my daughter is possessed by a demon!

Jesus didn't answer her, he didn't even recognize her. Her yelling was bothering the disciples and they wanted Jesus to have someone remove her from the crowd. It was not right for a Gentile woman to yell at men, especially not in public. How disrespectful and rude. Can you imagine how people must have been looking at her? The disciples wanted her removed, her disrespect was distracting to them. It wasn't the usual Gentile banter. It was the yelling of a parent crying out for Jesus to have mercy on her and her daughter. It was disturbing them, perhaps even annoying the disciples.

But instead of having her removed Jesus decides to respond to her. He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Meaning, I wasn't sent to bring salvation to Gentiles like you. I was only sent to save this other race, the Israelites. After hearing this she came and knelt down before him, begging, "help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Whoa! Time out. Jesus, Jesus Christ, just said the Israelites were God's children and the Canaanite woman was a dog. Our Jesus just called a woman to her face a dog. This

expression and slur rings true even today, many years later. There are several racial slurs you hear people casually use in their daily lives. And for the Jews, it was very common for them to refer to the Gentiles as dogs, after all, they didn't live clean lives. Look at what they ate and their lack of rules. It's disgusting. They ate like the dogs, so they were called dogs.

Yet this woman, after being called a dog, said, "Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly. I have to imagine a smile on Jesus' face when he saw the woman's faith. When he saw her true self shine through those words, that even if I am a dog, I still get what flows freely from the table. I imagine Jesus takes pride, for finally someone gets it. This unexpected outcast gets it, that the kingdom of God is for everyone. It's not just for those that follow these rules or look like this or act like that. It's for all.

Now Tyre and Sidon, while near Jewish towns, were Gentile regions. And once you hear Jesus' non-Jesussy words, you almost wonder, did he do that on purpose? Did he purposefully lead them to a Gentile place? Did he purposefully act like typical Jews of the day? Did he purposefully lead them here after the parable to see if they truly understood it? We don't know. We don't know what method of learning Jesus was using here.

This unlikely candidate, a Gentile woman, reveals God's purpose in this story. Whether she is reminding Jesus or just reminding everyone else, it's unclear. But she shows the crowd that God's mercy does not simply cover one race or group of people. God's mercy is extended to all. People can follow different dietary standards, they can be of a different race or nationality, they can speak different languages, be of different genders, and hold different professions, and all be children of God. All be shown mercy and grace and love and given salvation. All receiving food. All welcome at the table.

This woman had faith. Bold faith. A faith that lead her to seek out this Israelite healer. A faith that lead her to the absurd, like yelling in public. Faith strong enough that even while receiving racial slurs, she allowed her true heart strings to come out of her mouth. The faith of a desperate loving parent. Faith strong enough to heal. Faith strong enough to teach.

Church, let us not get so caught up in our traditions that we forget what is most important. God's generosity, grace, love and mercy should be our welcome hospitality for all. And all means all.