

Sermon: Into the Mouth, Out of the Mouth

Scripture: Matthew 15:1-28

Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat." He answered them, "And why do you break the commandments of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and 'Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.' But you say whoever tells father or mother, 'Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,' then that person need not honor the father. So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God. You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said: "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.'" 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 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 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 master's 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.

THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD!

Long list of instructions about what and when things could be touched or eaten dominate much of the first century Jewish religious teaching. These dietary laws placed a high premium on the purity of the individual, and today's passage, Jesus is turning expectations on their head. While most of the religious community was preoccupied with what would defile and hurt the body, Jesus was more concerned with what comes out of our bodies that can defile and hurt the world.

Yesterday's lunch is gone forever. Jesus asks, "Do you not see that whatever goes in the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?" (v.17). It is a crude image. The sewer has carried away any mistakes we may have made by putting into our body things that the dietary laws call unclean. However, the careless words, the evil, the lies, and the fortification continue to be harmful. Our words and actions have the power to defile and hurt, and the pain of those choices is not washed down the sewer like yesterday's lunch.

If the dietary laws of ancient Israel seem distant, the principles on which they were based are still active in our culture today. Many in our culture were raised with a similar ethic. We were taught that good children kept their bodies clean of those things that could defile. While this is still true, Matthew's text may help shift listeners from a purely individualist theology to a broader Christian citizenship. Jesus calls us from a self-centered consideration of what might harm our bodies to a broader concern of how our actions and attitudes hurt others.

Matthew connects this discussion of defilement with Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman, a difficult passage for preaching, raising questions that are difficult to answer in a single sermon. This passage has a demon, Jesus ignoring the cries of a desperate mother, annoyed disciples, a restrictive mission of Jesus, and an apparent insult of Jesus calling this woman a dog – too much to raise and satisfy in one sermon or even a few sermons. Nevertheless, preaching the difficult text reminds us all that life is messy and that not every issue of significance is nearly as tied up in three points.

One theme running through this chapter is the role that tradition should play in religious life. Anyone involved in pastoral ministry knows of church battles fought “for God”. In the name of “Tradition”. Tradition can mean anything from a worship practice that occurs more than once to a liturgical rite that the church has practiced for generations. Tradition can provide a solid, yet flexible, foundation for faithfulness, but it can also function in the opposite way. In this text, Jesus chastises the official keepers of Jewish tradition for having squeezed the life and liveliness out of their tradition until it has calcified into an irrelevant religious relic or worse.

For those who commit their lives to worship and serve God within the Christian community, today's Gospel selection has anything but the ring of ancient history. Matthew recalls the encounter between Jesus and the Jerusalem authorities, not just to record this memorial exchange.

Matthew is writing to the church of his day, a church that is an increasing blend of Jew and Gentile, of those who were raised within the scriptures of Jewish written and oral tradition and those who were excluded on the basis of the same tradition. Those new Christians who were raised in the Hebrew tradition are sorting through which of those written and oral traditions to carry forward into the church's life and why. In verses 1-10, Jesus mocks how religious leaders have used tradition in perverse ways to contradict the will of God, and echoes of this exchange are still nearly deafening in the twenty-first century church.

In this selection's verses (v. 10-20), the evangelist recounts a sermon from Jesus that hit hard in its original setting and in Matthew's day, and even in centuries later. Purity or religious faithfulness to God, says Jesus, is not about worshipping tradition uncritically. “It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles” (v.11).

This is not just a short saying stating a general truth that Jesus tosses into conversation to baffle his believers; it is a prophetic statement by the one who refuses to allow “Tradition” and traditions to be used as a “Holy” reason claiming that God's grace and eternal affection are reserved only for the ritually pure, that is, the people of Israel. For those in and out of the church who lament that the bible has no relevance, invite them to spend time in the company of Jesus in verses 10-20.

While this encounter between Jesus and the Jerusalem religious authorities is good news for most Christians that come from gentile stock, its warnings carry over to church authorities. It serves as a dominical warning to the church to take care in how it understands hospitality and faithfulness. What preacher has not heard – or, sadly, implied – that “They” would not be comfortable worshipping here? What church has not paid far more attention to “washing hands” than cleansing hearts? What Christian has not claimed religious tradition as an excuse to act in a way far from the heart of Christ?

The argument between Jesus and the religious authorities is no obscure theological fight over how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. For Jesus, religious purity and faithful discipleship are not measured ultimately by how many perfect attendance badges one earns for Sunday school or worship, how often one has read the Bible from cover to cover, or how much money one contributes to the treasury. Purity and faithfulness are shown ultimately by how the church speaks and lives out the radical hospitality and love of Christ.

As one reads this chapter in its entirety, Jesus moves from one intense encounter with the keepers of tradition to an equally intense encounter with two anonymous women for whom tradition has proven to be a “Holy” fence, keeping them on the outside. In good prophetic tradition, Jesus enacts the parable of what he has just argued. He travels into “unwashed” territory that tradition considers a “Toxic waste area.”

What church and what Christian has not pointed to a territory that is considered an unclean, miry, dangerous place where discipleship may well be polluted?

Jesus is in the Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon, where prudent Israelites do not walk alone.

Radical stereotypes and bigotry inform all encounters between Israelites and Canaanites. The disciples walk with full attention, informed by the stories of animosity and violence. Then one of them, a resident of this alien territory, shouts at Jesus. These are not the expected shouts of bigotry that characterize the relationship of mutual disdain. Instead, this is the plea of a mother.

Some roles trump all others. Yes, she is a Gentile. Yes, as a citizen of Tyre or Sidon she probably worships Herod. Yes, she is a Canaanite. However, she is also a mother with a troubled child, and in the desperate cry of a concerned parent, she petitions the one who has a reputation for healing the sick. Her appeal is a compelling one. She calls him “Lord” and appeals respectfully and cross-culturally to the “Son of David” with her petition on behalf of her daughter who is tormented by a demon. Jesus does not answer her, and the disciples are even more offensive. They appeal for Jesus, “Send her on her way, for she keeps shouting after us.” (v.23). In terms of civility, Jesus’ silence is the high moment of this selection.

He answers her petition with the explanation of a limited mission; “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (v.24). While this is a restrictive mission, it is important to note that Jesus clearly understands his mission. Matthew’s gospel highlights the time Jesus spends away in prayer. Through prayerful relationship with God, Jesus understands his mission in the world. He is not deterred from his ultimate and redemptive purpose. Saying yes to great things means saying No to good things. The limitations of time and space, for everyone who walks this planet, means choosing to leave some things not done.

Although Jesus remains undeterred, the mother continues her appeal on behalf of her tormented daughter, “Lord, help me” (v.25). As already noted, the silence of Jesus is his most civil response. This time, Jesus refers to her as a dog, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (v.26). Referring to Canaanites as dogs was a familiar and favorite insult of the Israelites. Calling a woman, a female dog had the same tone as if it were shouted today in a high school hallway.

This language is not what the most sensitive of us expect. We expect Jesus to respond differently.

Some suggest that Jesus’ talking with the Canaanite woman at all is a radical affirmation of her personhood. Some point to the fact that Jesus finally grants her plea, as an example of Jesus’ radical inclusion of a gentile, making an appeal for the broad reach of the Gospel. The response of Jesus may have been tongue-in-cheek irony, using conventional language to make the opposite point. After all, it does follow the admonition about what comes out of our mouths.

Matthew tells this story to stimulate the pastoral imagination and to ask questions that common sense would quickly quell. What would it mean for the church to follow Jesus into the “Toxic waste areas” of the world? What would it mean for the faithful to fret less about how “we have always done it this way” and listen more to the cries of those that tradition considers “unclean” or “unwanted”? On behalf of her anonymous, Gentile daughter, this anonymous, Gentile woman refuses to allow even Jesus to let “tradition” become an external barrier, blocking access to the grace of God.

“The woman, aware of her location and the limitations placed on her, does not succumb to them but brings them into the light and calls them into question: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters table” (v.27).

Matthew weaves together these verses to foreshadow the closing charge from the risen Jesus: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). Yes, Jesus has come to fulfill God’s promise to the people of Israel, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (v.15:24). Whatever Jesus meant by these sharp words, Matthew cites them to remind the church always to rejoice that God’s love and promise for Israel is fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Those of Gentile stock, adopted into this covenant tradition, need never forget this and never tire in giving thanks that, in Jesus God’s covenant promises stretch the length of the cross for all nations.

PRAYER: Give me a quiet heart, so that I can hear your firm, but gentle voice teaching me the lessons you give so lovingly and so wisely. AMEN.

BENEDICTION: What matters to God is not so much **how** we act, (Tradition) but **why** we act; not so much what we actually do, but what we wish in our hearts to do. That people cannot call themselves good because they observe external rules and regulations; they can call themselves good only when their hearts are pure. That very fact is the end of pride, and the reason why every one of us can say only: 'God be merciful to me, a sinner.' GO IN PEACE!