

LEADER: SERMON -Rev. Dr. Ali Tote *Matthew 15:10-28*
Assistant to the Bishop, Saskatchewan Synod

“WHO’S IN? AND WHO’S OUT?”

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 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. The gospel of the Lord. Praise be to you O Christ!

Sisters and brothers, siblings in Christ,

At this point of journey on the twelfth Sunday after the season of Pentecost, or ordinary time also known as the season of the church, the Holy Spirit’s birthing of the church and sustaining of the church in its growth means that we are solidly aware of who we are as recipients of God’s benevolent love and grace, and whose we are as God’s beloved children.

Such is the case for Matthew’s community at this juncture of their journey as this community of believers who are aware of their special status as God’s people and the call that they are therefore blessed to be a part of. They are called to join Jesus in making the shift from learners to teachers, from the gathered ones to the sent-out ones, from being disciples, to now becoming apostles, from being only with their own, to now reaching beyond their usual circle

of family and friends, and acquaintances. They are called to make the shift from understanding God's love and grace in a restrictive sense, to now understanding God's love and grace as boundless and limitless, and including and welcoming all.

Matthew 15:10-28 culminates in Jesus' crossing important boundaries into gentile territory, in Tiro and Sidon. Jesus' engagement there with the Canaanite woman prompts everyone to wrestle with the very important question: Who's in and who's out?

If in the earlier part of the text, in Matthew 15:10-20, Jesus is insisting that people are focusing on the wrong things, external things, as sources of defilement, in the latter part of the text, Jesus demonstrates with undeniable precision, that the source of defilement is rather internal, and proceeds from the heart.

In other words, we are focusing on the wrong things as the source of the issues we face. The heart of this gospel text is Jesus' rebuke of a system built on self-righteousness, the judgment and condemnation of others, their exclusion and marginalization along with their treatment as belonging outside of God's reign and reach.

Matthew aptly moves us from Jesus' discourse in verses 10-20 to the praxis of that discourse in verses 21-27. And verse 28 is the stunning reversal and display of God's all-encompassing love and grace that has to survive our system of rejection, marginalization, and oppression, that excludes people like the Canaanite woman. To her, and shockingly to the people present and to us today, Jesus proclaims to this rejected and despised Canaanite: "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

Jesus' proclamation of the greatness of the gentile woman's faith stands in sharp contrast to what anyone expected. How can anything good come outside of Israel? The Pharisees who were already unhappy with Jesus' declaration that "it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles" would now be even more livid.

The most shocking part about Jesus' declaration is how Jesus contrasts the Pharisees' myopic focus on the nature of what goes into the mouth and its implications as opposed to what comes out of the mouth and the different reality that this points to. The Pharisees were obtusely focused on food as that which goes into the mouth, hence focusing on personal purity and self-righteousness. Jesus turns the Pharisees' paradigm completely on its head by focusing on what proceeds from the mouth, which is totally different in nature from food, and which has a wider reach. Jesus' shift focuses not on individual purity and personal salvation, but on the reign of God that reaches out to all people and embraces them without discrimination.

Jesus engages the Canaanite woman in a stunning display of Christ's incarnational enactment of the sin and sinfulness of our hearts expressed and lived out in how we marginalize others. Before our face, Jesus plays our part to perfection. Jesus shows the people present how the

proceeds from their hearts that have helped established a system of discrimination, prejudice, and marginalization, plays out and its impact on the marginalized, the vilified, the downtrodden, the forsaken, and the oppressed.

The Canaanite woman, a gentile who is not accepted or welcome, who does not belong, but to whom God has been present all along, has her God-given opportunity to display the marvel, the beauty, the kernel of the gospel. As Jesus engages the Canaanite woman humorously but with a surgical precision that excises the sin of discrimination and prejudice that has ostracized her and her people for so long, we are left speechless in front of God's undeniable display of humanity's sin of self-righteousness on the one hand, and of rejection and ill-treatment of others on the other hand.

We are left to see the ways in which we build our families, our communities, our churches, our villages, our cities, our countries, our ethnic groups, our racial groups, and whatever groups we have formed, on a system that identifies who's in and who's out, and maintain things that way.

The world including the church continues to wrestle with systemic discrimination, racism, and the oppression of those who are not seen as belonging.

In Canada, we continue to wrestle with the evils of colonization and its genocidal impacts on Indigenous people. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action have become one of the ways we can respond and journey with Indigenous people in a good way. Jesus does not need to engage Indigenous people in the manner we sinfully do to show us how we have mistreated Indigenous people. We have ample evidence of past, present, and even hints of future actions that continue to inflict more harm and pain on Indigenous people.

In the United States, the ongoing struggles of Blacks, Latinos, Latinas, Latinxs, and other minorities are on full display everyday.

These challenges are present in other parts of the world, such as in India with the marginalized Dalits, in Cameroon with the marginalized Anglophones, in China, with the marginalized Uyghurs, in the middle-East with unending conflicts that continue to discriminately inflict pain, In Europe with the plight of refugees and immigrants to name only a few. These are all examples of systems that continue to oppress and marginalize entire groups of people. All of this in addition to the concerning trend we are seeing negatively impacting people from the 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

Our beloved church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada continues to strive to respond to Jesus' call as displayed in his engagement of the Canaanite woman upon whom God's grace comes to rest. Jesus' proclamation to her "Great is your faith" acts as a rebuke of the Pharisees to whom greatness in the faith is rooted in their patriarchs crystallized in Abraham as the gold standard of faith and faith greatness. A system built on that paradigm meant that only people who identified with such a system, belonged. Jesus upgrading of the old paradigm and

broadening it to include everyone while shockingly praising the faith of this gentile woman as “great”, presents us with a renewed call to live out the central message of the gospel.

Sisters and brothers, siblings in Christ,

We are called to be benevolent like Jesus in living out the gospel of God’s all-embracing love. The test of our living out the gospel is not found only in who we embrace, but also, and most importantly, in who we reject or in who we do not embrace.

In the church, we have often proclaimed our acceptance of marginalized people while rejecting others within our midst. An all-encompassing love calls us to embrace and deeply love the ones among us with whom we do not see eye to eye.

Shall we welcome some and reject others? Or shall we love all and embrace all? The answer is obvious; isn’t it?

The church’s sin can often be found in its internal struggles where people victimize one another even as the church seeks to genuinely include others. Could it be that the church finds it easier to love the stranger with whom there is no real engagement, than to internally love one another and treat each other with kindness, acceptance, and grace?

Jesus may need to enact that one for us to see and repent yet again!

May Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, bless the word in our hearts and in our minds.

Amen!