

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

56:1 Thus says the LORD: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed.

56:6 And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant--

56:7 these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

56:8 Thus says the Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

Psalm 67

67:1 May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, Selah

67:2 that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations.

67:3 Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.

67:4 Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth. Selah

67:5 Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.

67:6 The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us.

67:7 May God continue to bless us; let all the ends of the earth revere him.

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

11:1 I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.

11:2a God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.

11:29 For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

11:30 Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience,

11:31 so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy.

11:32 For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28

15:10 Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand:

15:11 it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles."

15:12 Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?"

15:13 He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted.

15:14 Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit."

15:15 But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us."

15:16 Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding?"

15:17 Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?

15:18 But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.

15:19 For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.

15:20 These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

15:21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.

15:22 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."

15:23 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."

15:24 He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

15:25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."

15:26 He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

15:27 She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

15:28 Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Sermon message for August 16th, 2020

Context matters. This past week I was part of an email communication thread in which a message came through that did not entirely make sense to me. I read it and made a reply, based on what I understood, and awaited a response. When none came, later on in the day, I happened to read the previous emails more carefully, and saw that another message had been right there all along, but I had not seen it. Suddenly an email that had been unclear and confusing was perfectly clear and even funny, in light of the additional information, which I had originally missed. My own response may even have been confusing to the recipients, since I myself had been puzzled. Have you been there? Context matters.

Perspective also matters. There was another time I was waiting at a stoplight and a large truck pulled up next to me in the right lane, blocking the view from the passenger's side. The light turned green for us to go, but I didn't move, and when my passenger urged me forward, I waited still more time. A second or two later, a pedestrian emerged from the other side of the truck to cross the road. I had been able to see him, but my passenger had not, since the truck was blocking the view from that side of the car.

In the first situation, I had been unable to understand because I had missed key information. In the second instance, my physical position in the car was the only thing that was different, and yet I could see something crucial that my passenger missed, just because I had another angle to see the road ahead.

In reading the passage this week, there is no getting around Jesus' harsh reply to the Canaanite woman. Well, there is one way. We are working through the lectionary, so I could have jumped to a different reading this week and avoided this encounter altogether by focusing on the story of Joseph's tearful reconciliation with his brothers, one of my all-time favorite stories from the Bible, instead of Matthew. But it's important to dive into tough texts and mine them for their wisdom, because it's often in these more difficult passages that the Bible begins to read us more than the other way around. This is a difficult passage to understand, consisting of many, many layers, and I have wrestled with it a great deal. I have a sense, however, that context and perspective will help a great deal to understand what's going on in this exchange. Let's dig in and explore the context, and go from there to how this interaction between Jesus and the Canaanite woman relates to our life of discipleship today.

Reading up a few verses, Jesus and the Pharisees have had a tense debate on ceremonial cleanliness - The Jewish leaders confront Jesus and his disciples for disregarding the traditions around ceremonial hand washing, and Jesus responds by saying that the Pharisees emphasize their traditions to the detriment of God's commands, the externalities of ritual and cleansing, compared to the condition of the heart behind the words and actions, which is God's main concern.

What is ritual cleanliness?

There were a number of other aspects to ritual cleanliness beyond washing hands before eating, which involved skin conditions, clean or unclean food and animals, bodily discharge, and the touching of dead bodies. Many stories from the Gospels involve Jesus' neglecting to uphold, or even blatantly disregarding the traditional boundaries the Pharisees were so keen to maintain. Traditions around cleanliness and the rituals to restore it were intended to remind the devout Jew of God's holiness, since human beings inevitably were contaminated with things that were unclean, either

from without or from within, and would thus require purification to approach a holy God. But the traditions eventually take more precedence even than pleasing God, and Jesus confronts this practice and doctrine.

In response to the Pharisees' critique, Jesus explains to the disciples that it is not what goes into a person that makes him or her unclean, but rather that which comes out of the mouth, proceeding from the heart. "For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them." A look at the Sermon on the Mount, from chapter 5, reveals that these issues of the heart are the very concerns he treats most thoroughly in his teaching there, not the religious professionals' traditions. The purity that Jesus emphasizes is forgiveness, humility, and reconciliation, healed relationships - in the sight of God and with respect to neighbors. Consider this passage from chapter 5:

"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar [to God] and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift." This is the kind of cleanliness (or purity) that Jesus seeks, and which honors God, not external compliance to ritual protocols. Keep this in mind as we continue exploring this passage.

Immediately after this tense exchange with the Pharisees, where the disciples even say to Jesus, "You know the Pharisees were offended by what you said," Matthew's account then takes us along with Jesus into Gentile territory, where he goes to seek retreat from the crowds that continually press around him. The conversation with the Canaanite woman is the only interaction recorded from a journey of at least several days, and so it is clear that Gospel writer Matthew seeks to convey something important to his readers through this story. In traveling to these places, Jesus and the disciples venture into territory laden with history, context, and centuries'-old grudges.

As we explore the history between these nations and bitterest of enemies, Canaan and Israel, we find two stories from the days of Elijah the prophet: one story in which the prophet miraculously provides bread for a widow from Sidon, and another story, where the king of Israel at the time, Ahab, marries a woman from this region, named Jezebel. Queen Jezebel leads Ahab and the whole nation into Baal worship, treachery, and the murder of God's prophets. Her influence on Israel is the beginning of that nation's downfall, eventual collapse, and exile to Assyria. Elijah the prophet predicts that Jezebel will be killed, and that dogs will eat her remains, which is what ultimately happens. The first story from the books of Kings involves bread, the second story, dogs. His mention of bread and dogs to the Canaanite woman would bring both the story of the widow and Jezebel to the minds of his listeners, in this case, the disciples (and Matthew's readers).

As scavengers in the Palestine of Jesus' day, dogs were considered unclean animals, like swine, so different from our relationship with dogs, where dogs are like family members, man's best friend. But even still, I can understand why dogs might be considered unclean, since our Great Dane Kara is the only member of our family who loves to get into the trash when we're away, leaving a grand mess on the kitchen floor, then bringing the best of it over to her bed.

But I digress. According to the Jewish Law and custom of those days, Gentiles ("the nations") were considered "unclean," and if a devout Jew even touched a Gentile it meant that the Jew had been made ceremonially unclean, and would not be able to go into the temple to worship God.

Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman occurs right after his confrontation with Israel's religious leaders, in the narrative. He rebukes them in the harshest of terms, saying their hearts are far from God and that they worship God in vain. They are blind guides whose teachings are but rules taught by men. Now, here he is, outside the territory of Israel, where

he encounters a non-Jew of mixed races, someone considered unclean by the very social-religious-political system he has just denounced.

And this woman will not be refused. Her daughter is afflicted by a demon, and she pleads for mercy, that Jesus would heal her. She cries to Jesus, saying, "Lord, Son of David," a Jewish title and reference to his authority among the Jews. She receives no reply. Her cries try the patience of the disciples, and eventually they plead to the Lord in exasperation, asking him to send her away, just so that they might have peace. Jesus says to the disciples that he is sent to the lost sheep of Israel. The woman's second cry resembles Peter's cry from the waters a chapter earlier, and the disciples' response to Jesus when he gets into the boat: she worships him, and says, "Lord, help me!" Here he turns to her and says, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." Bread and dogs - this is a test of the woman's heart. Is she more like the Sidonian widow, or more like Jezebel?

At this point, many others in dialogue with Jesus would have taken offense and been on their way, such as the religious leaders earlier in the passage, who had been so easily offended by Jesus' rebuke. Not so this Canaanite woman. She continues to persist in her plea, and in so doing is one of the few dialogue partners in any of the Gospel accounts who holds her own with Jesus. She says, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table!" Your primary mission may be to the Jews, but any part of that meal would be a blessing, even if it's just this small thing. Her tenacity of faith, her humility to bear an insult and quick wit elicit Jesus' praise: "'Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.' And her daughter was healed at that moment."

Jesus in this exchange has one eye on the disciples, and the other on the woman. The disciples must have been asking themselves, "What is the teacher going to do with this unclean Gentile woman who won't leave us alone?" The purity laws the Pharisees exalted forbade him to even speak

with her. But here she is, responding in the very spirit of Jesus' own teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, persevering despite his rebuff and continuing to plead for her daughter's sake.

Jesus' concern is with the cleanliness of the heart, as we read a few passages earlier, and the perseverance of the Canaanite woman displays the very characteristics of his teachings that his own disciples are so slow to understand. Her heart, which is grounded in pure love for her daughter, and genuine worship of God, leads her to true confession of faith in Christ. What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart. True love bears all things: insults, scorn from enemies, and rejection. True love perseveres in the face of all opposition and rebuke.

Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman is a hinge point between two stories of miraculous feeding: the first, of a primarily Jewish crowd on the northwestern shore of Galilee; the second feeding, of a primarily Gentile crowd on the eastern shore. He is not taught a lesson in tolerance by the Canaanite woman's persistence, as some commentators would argue, since he knows her heart, but the disciples might have learned something. They wanted him to send her away, finding her shouts and commotion to be irritating. His silence heightens their discomfort, and then Jesus makes this statement about bread and dogs rhetorically, giving voice to the disciples' thoughts and to a common perspective among the Jews toward outsiders.

This healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter marks a turning point in the Gospel of Matthew, and whereas the focus of Jesus' ministry with the disciples previously had been on the towns and villages of Israel -- when sending out the twelve he even instructs them "...not [to] go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel" (Matt 10:5) -- The disciples' indifference to the Canaanite woman at the outset of the story revealed that their hearts were still as yet unready to undertake a mission beyond Israel's borders, so he limited them to the

towns and cities of their nation. Now, after this brief excursion to bring the disciples outside of Israel's borders, and his encounter with the Canaanite woman, he returns to the area around the Sea of Galilee and performs the second miraculous feeding, this time to a mostly Gentile crowd. The first feeding was among the Jews, the second was on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, the Gentile side. In verses 29 and 30 we read, "after leaving that region Jesus took the road by the Sea of Galilee, where he climbed a hill and sat down. Crowds flocked to him, bringing with them the lame, blind, dumb, and crippled, and many other sufferers; they put them down at his feet, and he healed them. Great was the amazement of the people when they saw the dumb speaking, the crippled made strong, the lame walking, and the blind with their sight restored; and they gave praise to the God of Israel."

But why does this story of a persistent Gentile woman's faith matter to us, 2000 years later? The application to our day and age of such a multifaceted story is just as layered as its interpretation. I have the sense that context and perspective once again will help us to read the text that is our reality of today. While tradition and ceremonial purity are not driving forces in our worldview, as they were for the Pharisees, we Americans of the 21st century do still wrestle with questions around who belongs and who doesn't, who is in or out, worthy or unworthy to receive the blessings of this land, and to how to relate to our neighbors in that context. Historically, the founding documents of this country exalted some and diminished others - proclaiming liberty and justice for all, while granting the vote exclusively to white men and counting the then slaves of African descent as three-fifths of a human being. Those same slaves had been kidnapped and brought here against their will from a distant land, and their children, born to be slaves in a land professing freedom as one of its highest ideals, under God. A theology of covenant then formed the basis for the movement of the people of this nation across the continent of North America, a new name that we had given it: "We have been chosen by God for this special task of settling the land," we told ourselves - and freedom's advance, for us, meant war

and terror, and the violent removal of and atrocities against the land's native peoples, the violation of treaty after treaty. It's a scene no less tragic than those we find in the stories of the Bible. Freedom's advance, for us white people, meant something different to the people around us. Our nation's traditions, our highest ideals: "that all men are created equal, for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," call us to celebrate our special place in the world, and our uniqueness among the people of the earth, but Jesus' challenge to the Pharisees and a look at the historical record begs the question as to how much we exalted those traditions over God, and focused on externalities like custom and color of skin, and neglected the heart: God's foremost concern.

Today's reality of race tensions, George Floyd's cry of "I can't breathe" lays bare a troubled history of how this nation has fallen short in upholding its own ideals, since for our brothers and sisters of color in this land, that incident was an all too familiar and repeated instance of so many like it. In a time of heightened anxiety and stress, already exacerbated by the pandemic, it is far too easy to respond like the disciples in the story, who just want Jesus to send the Canaanite woman away, in the face of her cries. The barrage of news stories and the complexity of it all can lead us to wall ourselves off and fall back into safe categories that keep some in and leave others out. But in story after story, the Bible's narrative upsets human ways of seeing and being, revealing deeper and greater mysteries of God's movement among and through people, and very often it's the one least expected who brings God's wisdom to bear, as in this encounter between Jesus, the disciples, and the Canaanite woman. How is your heart today? Can you hear the cry of your neighbor? Jesus calls us to reconcile with those who bear a grudge with us before going to God's altar with our gift. What would this look like in your life today? In what ways has your heart become walled off to others whose lives were shaped in different ways than your own? Explore the context, listen to perspectives, and follow the Holy Spirit's lead. Amen.