

Yr. A, Proper 15
August 16, 2020
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1485 Words

Lessons: **Isaiah 56:1, 6-8**
****Psalm 67****
****Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32****
****Matthew 15:10-28****

The religious experts were giving Jesus a fit...*again*. This time it was because his disciples didn't wash their hands, as prescribed by the religious Law. Well, Jesus claps back. "You hypocrites!" he says. "It's not what goes *into* the mouth that defiles...but what comes out."

It was bad enough that our rabbi's disciples were caught dirty-handed, but then Jesus chooses to escalate the conflict. He could have said to the Pharisees, "Get over it!" and just walked away. Instead, Jesus subverts the principle of purity ensconced in the Torah's traditional standards for cleanliness, not just the handwashing requirements.

"What goes into the mouth is unimportant." Jesus says. "If you doubt me, just check out the sewer. What *really* counts in life is what comes out of your mouth, because that is a picture-perfect representation of what is in your heart."

For the benefit of St. Peter, Jesus spells it out in detail. "(Words that convey) dishonesty, slander, greed, lust, violence, and corrupt intentions will tell you everything you need to know about a person...*not* what they had for breakfast."

Our Lord, Jesus Christ speaks in plain, direct, and actually vulgar language about these things. It is hard for us gentiles with our nearly uninhibited, wide-ranging appetites and casual handwashing practices to appreciate just how scandalous this teaching is to the religious people who are offended.

And yet, we know in our gut that Jesus is right. We have too many pathetic examples on the airwaves and in social media to deny that what comes out of peoples' mouths is utterly defiling. We have too many pathetic examples from our own lips to deny just how perfectly our words reflect the condition of our hearts.

So, which words do *you* value the most? Which speakers (or writers) receive most of your attention? Are their words reliable, thoughtful, and measured? Are their words respectful of other people, and non-violent in every sense? How much attention do you devote to the words of people who are generous in spirit...modest in manner...and pure in heart? In other words, do *their* words...and do *your* words sound like the words of Jesus?

The Psalmist taught us how to pray: "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer." (Psalm 19.14) Do the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts *challenge us* to strive for more justice and more peace and more love toward our neighbors ...actions that are always acceptable in the sight of our Lord, our Strength, and our Redeemer?

Before you answer these questions, we need to walk with Jesus and his disciples to the coast. The District of Tyre and Sidon was gentile territory, northwest of Galilee. This used to be Phoenicia, the 'Land of Purple,' the birthplace of the Western alphabet, the home of the written word...a place shaded by thick forests of the Cedars of Lebanon which became the timbers for the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem.

There are no Jewish Pharisees or scribes up there with whom Jesus might spar about matters of theology and faith. These are foreigners—gentiles not interested in Jewish theology or faith.

These Canaanites are more interested in the power of the storm god, Baal. You know, the one whom Jewish prophets rejected for a thousand years. This Canaanite god was perceived as the champion of divine order over earthly chaos—deadly droughts and violent seas.¹ Let's face it—we are *all* looking for a heavenly champion to do something about all this earthly chaos. Right?

Well, nothing is more chaotic than watching someone you love fall ill. Nothing is more chaotic than that feeling of powerlessness to alleviate the suffering of someone you love. “What do I need to pray in order to fix this?” we think to ourselves. “I'll do *anything* for my child,” we swear from the deepest place in our hearts. “I'll do anything...say anything...pray anything, Lord, just tell me what to do.”

Do you see how far we've come from the debate about handwashing? Jesus is so right. It's not what goes into the mouth that matters, it's what comes out...what comes out from the deepest place in our hearts. That Canaanite woman would not have given a whit about Jewish theology and faith, *unless* it would bring healing for her daughter. You and I are no different.

And so, when she *shouts* her prayer, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David...” we understand those words! Now, remember, ‘Son of David’ is a *Jewish* title for a *Jewish* Messiah. It makes *no* sense coming out of the mouth of a gentile. *And Remember*, it was King David who completely decimated this woman's ancestors 1000 years earlier. So, ‘Son of David’ makes *no sense* coming out of the mouth of a Canaanite.

This Canaanite woman is not saying, ‘Son of David’ because she cares about Jewish Messianic theology. She says it because she cares about her daughter, and she will do *anything*...say anything...*pray anything* for her child's healing.

“Maybe the words of her mouth and the meditation of her heart *are acceptable* in the sight of the Lord.” Maybe Jesus is dumbfounded, for he does not say a word initially.

But the disciples do. They are like us. They urge Jesus to send away this obnoxious woman, a foreigner whose problem is not their problem. The disciples urge Jesus to ignore the words from her mouth...the words from her heart, which he *refuses to do*.

Instead, he speaks to her. “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel,” Jesus says. Now, these words *also sound* a lot like heartfelt words from someone focused on being a good shepherd for the poor sheep of his own flock. I get that. We all understand—and *appreciate*—loyalty. Loyalty is a good thing.

But she will not give up. She kneels down, which is what desperate people do to show respect and sincerity. “*Lord, help me.*” There it is again—those desperate words are a perfect reflection of her desperate heart.

The reply Jesus gives seems unacceptable. “It is not fair,” he says, “to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.” I don't know of a good explanation, because this sounds so uncharacteristically narrow, coming out of Jesus' mouth.

These words appear at first to prioritize tribal loyalty over expansive compassion, and we know that is not the nature of Jesus Christ. Nothing else he ever says or does expresses any limit on his compassion for people who are suffering or in need—the lost sheep of *any flock*.

Remember, it was probably just a few weeks earlier when Jesus lambasted *his own Jewish neighbors* in the Galilean cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida for their lack of faith.

¹ Baal essay by David G. Burke, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, eds. Bruce Metzger & Michael Coogan (NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993), p. 70.

Jesus said this: “If the deeds of power I have done here had been done in...(wait for it) Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented *long ago*.” (Matthew 11:21)

Don't you see? In chapter 11 of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus predicted *this* moment...when a Canaanite in the District of Tyre and Sidon would repent, would *change her thoughts and words* on account of a deed of power by Jesus.

Maybe Jesus remembers what he had said to his Jewish neighbors as he listens to her say, “Even the dogs (are willing to) eat the crumbs that fall from their Master's table.”

What could he say? Her broken words offer a perfect picture of her broken heart. And so, Jesus changes *his* mind, and his words, and says what is true—“Woman, *great* is your faith! Let it be done for you...as you wish.”

It is tempting to want to be religious experts in theology and faith, rather than being bothered by the *more difficult work* of plumbing the depths of our hearts. It is tempting to be so loyal to our tribe (however you define it) that we end up either dismissive or disrespectful to people who appear to be an unfair nuisance to us. It is tempting to simply ignore the challenging words we hear...the words that provoke us to do more justice and love more mercy and walk more humbly with our God.

In this season when talk has become so cheap; I pray that we will value even more deeply the words (and the deeds) of Jesus.

Loyal to the lost sheep of *his* flock? Yes. Open-minded enough to *change his thinking* about the size and shape of his flock? Absolutely. Compassionate with the broken and the broken-hearted? Always!

May our theology serve to give us a better vocabulary to speak more like Jesus. And may our faith give us the courage to act more like Jesus.

“And may the words of our mouths and the meditations of *our* hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.”

Amen.