

## *Matthew 15:10-28, 2014*

This gospel passage is as interesting as it is difficult.

There is no ignoring Jesus' words to the Canaanite woman. I don't think we can make sense of these two stories without pulling in the one just before them in the first 9 verses of chapter 15.

In those verses is a story about Jesus talking with the Pharisees and scribes who began the conversation with an accusation about Jesus' disciples eating without washing their hands, and how that defiles them because it violates Jewish law.

Jesus makes the conversation about religious tradition created by humans.

He asks them, "Why do you break the commandments of God for the sake of your tradition? 'God said honor your father and your mother...'"

but you say that whoever tells father or mother, 'whatever support you might have had from me is given to God.' Then a person need not honor the father. So for the sake of your tradition you make void the word of God."

This tradition would leave the elderly without any support or help in their later years.

Jesus goes on reciting Isaiah, “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrine.”

Whew! Is that ever convicting for us today.

Even back in the day of Isaiah God was dealing with the same issue, just as we still do today! Some things don't change do they?

This is where we pick up today's gospel lesson with Jesus saying that it isn't what goes in the mouth from the unclean hands that defiles a person,

or makes them religiously unclean,

but what comes out of the mouth that that defiles, because what comes out of the mouth “proceeds from the heart, and that is what defiles.”

Whatever is in your heart shapes everything you do and everything you say.

What you intend, your actions, your words, the flavor of your words come from the heart.

If the intent of your behavior and words is to lift up, to care for the other person, to do good, then it is the good that is in your heart that inspires you.

Likewise, your destructive actions and your hateful words come from your heart as well.

I believe that it is these two stories together that prepare us for the next most difficult story about the Canaanite woman who won't leave Jesus alone, but keeps shouting after him to get his attention.

“Have mercy on me Lord, Son of David!”

She may be Canaanite, but she knew who she was talking to.

Now, neither the disciple's nor Jesus' response to her sounds like they came from a very loving and caring heart.

The disciples told Jesus he needed to send her away, she was being too much of a nuisance.

Jesus responded to the disciples, “I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

It is important to remember that Jesus says this to the disciples, not the woman. As yet Jesus has not had an unkind word for her.

What he says is a statement of fact. It was to Israel that Jesus was sent, and they were a lost a people.

They remained a lost people on the day Jesus speaks these words, as evidenced by the conversation Jesus had with the Pharisees and scribes,

who I might add were living lives of committed faith to God as best they could.

When Jesus said this He may have been testing the disciples to see if they would hear their own voices in this comment, look at themselves, examine their own hearts and make whatever correctives were needed with regard to this woman.

Who knows? Well, no one knows for sure what Jesus' intentions were.

But, this woman came to Jesus, fell on her knees and pleaded for her daughter's healing.

She knew there was no one else, no other way her daughter would be healed.

What this woman does is significant first because she, and Jesus, break all the traditions of community between the Canaanites and the Israelites.

Suffice it to say, there was a history of conflict between these two peoples that traces all the way back to Noah in the book of Genesis.

It is in chapter nine is you want to read the story.

Of course as you already know women had their place in society, and were never to have a conversation with a man in public.

Neither was a man to engage such a conversation.

Secondly, this woman comes on her knees. She humbles herself before Jesus and makes her plea.

“Lord, help me.”

Now, Jesus’ response to the woman is hard for us to understand. The words themselves sound harsh.

“It isn’t fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

I can’t say that I can make sense of them. But, we don’t know his tone, his body language, the reflection of his heart, and I cannot defend the words.

However, if all we know about Jesus is true I have to ask, was he stating the obvious to this woman because that was the attitude of the Jews toward the Canaanites? Was he so certain about and focused on his mission that he needed to make it clear what he was about?

Again, I don’t know.

In the end we know that the woman does not give up and Jesus grants her request, healing her daughter, because she had great faith.

Well all this takes us back to our original issue of religion and tradition.

What is religion all about?

This is an especially relevant question for our day and time when so many people are experiencing their spiritual outside the church, when so many have never picked up a bible and read it.

This is a relevant question in a world where the old norms of faith and Christianity no longer has influence.

I have had my understanding about how people come to a life of faith, and how that should inform how we go about evangelism these days, clarified and affirmed by some of the things I have learned over the last couple of months.

All through the Christian culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century people entered into faith and church life by first **giving assent to a body of beliefs** wrapped up and packaged in theology and doctrine, and as they **became** more mature in their faith and understanding they finally **belonged** to the community of faith.

They could talk the same language, behave the same way.

But, in this day and time it works just the opposite.

People now come to **belong** to something.

They want to belong to a supportive, caring, loving community that makes a difference in their lives, and the lives of others.

As they engage those relationships they **become** a greater part of the community, and then as they learn what it is that makes that community different they begin to **believe** in the God we believe in, the God who shapes us personally and as community.

They learn about and come to believe in the Jesus we believe in.

So instead of;

Believing – becoming and belonging, they

Belong – become and then believe.

An example:

There was a large church that needed a new drummer for their praise band, and so as they searched they focused on the technical quality and skill of the candidates, and hired a very gifted non-Christian musician.

This drummer played at the church after he completed his Saturday night sets at the night-club.

After about a year he became very tired from the demands this put on him,

and in a conversation with his wife he shared his need for rest and his intent to quit one of the gigs.

His wife quickly said, “Quit the clubs!”

He was surprised at his wife’s response because not being a Christ-follower herself she had no investment in which he chose, that was apparent to him anyway.

He asked, “Why?”

“Because I like you so much better since you started playing in that praise band.”

After thinking about it he responded, “You know, I think I am one of them now. I think I’ve become one of those Christ-follower people.”

This guy experienced Christ through real live people and it changed his life, who he was.

He found a place where he belonged and **became** like those people who loved him.

He loved his wife more and treated her better.

It was through that experience that he became more loving and could come to **believe** in this God we believe in, and take for granted;

A God who would be so ridiculous as to love so much that He would sacrifice His Son for the people He created, but whose hearts are so far away.

“This people honors me with their lips, **but their hearts are far from me**; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrine.”

it isn’t what goes in the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth...because what comes out of the mouth “**proceeds from the heart...**”

Here is what religion is all about. Here is what worship is all about; it is about the heart!

It is humbly kneeling at Jesus feet and pleading,  
Lord help me!

We are the dogs Jesus speaks about in this lesson. We are the ones who are unworthy, but Jesus gives the best He has as we receive the crumbs from His table;

Here is what religion is all about!

From His table where He serves little bits of bread and wine you receive the crumbs that fall from the master's table;

Then having been loved so deeply, you love others into community first and then in relationship with Jesus.

Those little crumbs were enough for the Canaanite woman and her daughter;

they are enough for you.