

Mercy!

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 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." 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." ²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵ 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." ²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." 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.
Matthew 15:21-28

"Mercy"

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
Saturday and Sunday, August 19 - 20, 2017

All Services
The Reverend Dr. Jack M. Horner, Jr.
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Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8; Psalm 67
Matthew 15:10-28

Grace and peace be to you from our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

So how many Lutherans does it take to change a lightbulb? Five! One to change the light bulb, and four to say how much better they like old bulb. Some traditions die very hard. But some are gone in an instant.

The Jewish dietary and Kosher laws called *kashrut* clearly taught that what a person was allowed to eat or not, what foods were considered clean and permissible and what foods were considered unclean and therefore prohibited.

For example:

Animals with cloven hooves that chew their cud are considered kosher or clean, cattle and sheep are kosher. Other, mammals, like pigs, camels, or rabbits are not kosher. They are unclean. Goats and deer, kosher. Reptiles, insects, and amphibians, not kosher. Fish, fish are in, kosher; shellfish and clams, out, not kosher. Blood is considered not kosher. It's unclean, and so you have to prepare the meat in a certain way so you could drain all the blood out. And then all of the meats had to be prepared well done, no medium rare. And there were even more rules that were related to food, both its preparation and diet, enough that it filled volumes of books written by rabbis over the centuries. For them and for the Pharisees of Jesus' day, the long-established tradition of what goes into the body is that what defiles a person spiritually.

In Part One of our gospel reading Jesus draws the crowds to him so that he can offer a teaching. And the teaching that he offers says just the opposite of the Jewish kosher laws. Jesus says it's not which goes into the mouth, but what comes out of the mouth that defiles a person. The Pharisees have made the difficult trip from Jerusalem to Galilee just listen and then to accuse Jesus and his followers, they understand how radical Jesus is being with his teaching and see both him and his movement as something that is dangerous. For Jesus is proclaiming nothing less than liberation and freedom as being more important than ritual, tradition or regulation. And for that reason, Jesus says, the food laws have to go. It's not their fault, they had their place in time and in circumstance. But Jesus rejects those called Pharisees (a word that literally means to keep separate) for taking laws and turned them into shackles to bind persons rather than to free them in faith and witness.

And in one sentence, in one small teaching, Jesus makes clean, that which was consider unclean and unacceptable. And so today there are no low carb, lots of fruits and vegetables, smoothie in the morning "**Christian**" diets. You and I can eat whatever we want! (in moderation, of course!)

What "defiles," Jesus says, is the excess of criticism about the disciples eating with unwashed hands and breaking the kosher laws. That word "*defiles*," *koinoo* in the Greek literally means "to make something common." But notice the direction that Jesus is speaking to, it's not what goes in, but instead what is "out of".

In other words, you and I cannot blame our sin or unrighteous from something on the outside. . . whether it's food, someone else, or "the devil made me do it." No, it comes from within Jesus says. You and me, we aren't kosher! With our "evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander," you get the idea. None are without sin, all fall short as we say in our confession; "we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves." It's personal, not ritual. It's about our hearts, not our mouth. Everyone has the opportunity to a clear slate. Everyone has the opportunity for redemption because it's all about God's mercy and grace after all!

Notice that Jesus is cancelling out a whole section of scripture that had been established by Moses fourteen hundred years before and continues to be a major part of the Jewish faith tradition. But Jesus's interpretation of scripture is the final authority and it should be also for the church. And that word that Jesus is saying is "mercy."

AA or Al-Anon or other twelve-step programs understand the fundamental problem in addiction is not what enters into one's mouth or into one's vein. Addiction at its core is a *heart* problem. A physical addiction can only be mended by a spiritual solution in which the person, recognizing they stuck, needs to ask help from their "higher power."

In Jesus' teaching God's created nature, once separated into blessed and cursed, clean and unclean, good and evil is unified in the Creator God who made it and his Son who redeems. It is nothing less than a return to Genesis, to the garden where God declared "it is good".

And I would guess that you, like me, have been hurt more by self-righteous gossips than you have by gluttonous sinners. "It's not about what does into the mouth, but what comes out that defiles a person." And notice what Jesus is saying here, the hurtful words, wound not only the person for whom they are intended but they also wound the person who is speaking them. They "defile" not only the person for whom the hurtful, negative words are intended but also themselves. Hateful words poison everyone. They are uncontrolled like a virus that mutates and destroys everything in its path included the host.

Look at the war of words in our society today. No dialogue, no conversation, no healthy exchange of ideas or viewpoints. Just charge and counter charge, salacious accusation and scorching denunciation. This, brothers and sisters, will destroy us as a society and community long before some external foe.

What pollutes the world today is the war of words. "Sticks and stones may break my bones" but names and words truly will destroy me and you.

But you control what you say. They can either be thoughtful words of wisdom and mercy or they can be words that lead to your judgment like the Pharisees.

Behind the Pharisees' pious words or actions, their hearts had no intention of really discovering what God desired and following the basic meaning of the commandments to love God and to love the people that God has created. These are hard words for all of us to hear, but sometimes Jesus offends some, so that all may be free. Some have said that Jesus came into the world to "Comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable."

You and I don't need a new diet or new laws or new tradition but Jesus says we need a new heart. It is our heart that must be changed. Mercy is what is called for. Faith is what is needed. And Jesus proclaims in this gospel reading mercy for all. He breaks down the boundaries of clean and unclean food and he breaks down the boundaries of those who are considered clean and unclean people.

In Part Two of our gospel reading Jesus travels from Galilee to the coast to Tyre and Sidon known for its wealth and trading, but also for being the land of pagans. And there he is confronted by a Canaanite woman, a woman who represents everything that is dangerous to the Jewish faith. When she meets Jesus, she is screaming at him. Not words of condemnation, not words that say: "Get out, you don't belong here," no, she is screaming words of worship. She is crying out to him, "Lord, Son of David help my daughter." This is reminiscent of Orthodox Christians Jesus' prayer also called the 'Prayer of the Heart.' "Lord Jesus Christ, Have mercy on me! That can be altered to include others, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on John." "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on Sally." "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on Terry."

At first, the woman is met with silence. Jesus after all had just announced his primary mission was going to be to the people of Israel, but at least he doesn't send her away. That's what the disciples want. Because like the Pharisees before they are having trouble seeing what Jesus' true mission is. The disciples aren't looking for their Savior to save, and so they ask Jesus just to get rid of this screaming woman. What they want is peace and quiet and order.

But Jesus is unflustered by the commotion of this woman. After all he is usually the one causing commotion, comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable.

And Jesus gives the woman life and hope and mercy that she cries out for. Her faith and her trust and her cries of mercy are met with mercies of a Savior. And what is that mercy? It is nothing less, brothers and sisters, than God's heart. God's act of love and care and compassion even when the world says "No", and instead cries out for vengeance, violence, and hatred.

This is what Jesus does, he shows mercy to those, like the Canaanite woman and like

you and like me, people not considered kosher, so that you and I can show mercy to a world desperately in need of compassion and healing. Amen.

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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