

MATTHEW 15:10-20

CLEAN VS. UNCLEAN: A MATTER OF THE HEART

American author, Presbyterian minister, preacher, and theologian Frederick Buechner wrote an imaginative retelling of the Old Testament stories of Jacob and Joseph titled *The Son of Laughter*. Within the text, there is a conversation between Rachel and her son, Jacob. She tells him, "A word can never be unspoken once it has been spoken. Do you understand what I mean?...This is what I mean. If you speak a word with the strength of your heart in it, you can never get that word out of the ears of the one you speak it to and back into your mouth again. Once a word goes forth, it makes things happen for better or for worse. Nothing you do will ever make those things unhappen even though you live for a thousand years." (HarperCollins Publisher, 1993)

Words can be intense: they have profound effect in the seven "h" words ~ the ability to help, heal, hinder, hurt, harm, humiliate and humble. "Words can build up or they can tear down. They can bring joy and they can bring pain. Words can also motivate and inspire us and even help us identify guiding principles to live by. Words have power, their meaning clarifies our behaviour in our world. Their energy arises from our emotional responses when we read, speak or hear them. Words move hearts and hearts move limbs." *

In the first half of our Gospel passage, we need to review what occurred in the first nine verses of Chapter 15. Jesus and his disciples had been accused of being unclean sinners by the Pharisees, who believed themselves to be the righteous keepers of God's laws and having final authority over them. They complained that Jesus' disciples hadn't washed their hands before eating, as their religious practices dictated.

Jesus points out that they broke their own commandment, that they had invented a legal loophole to keep their wealth instead of caring for their parents (v 4-6), thus dishonoring them. He calls the Pharisees what they were: "hypocrites." (v 6); keeping of tradition was more important to them than obeying God's Word.

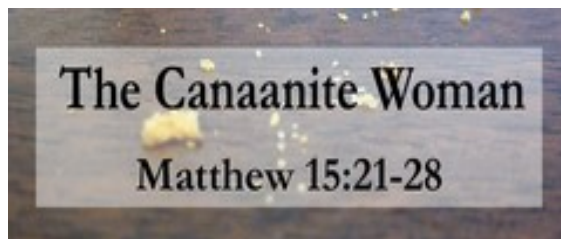
This morning, Jesus reminds us all that "it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." (v 11)
Harmful words express evil intentions that lead to harmful deeds.

The disciples tell Jesus that the Pharisees were offended by his rebuke and Jesus then compares the Pharisees to plants and blind guides:

Because they did not honour God and His Kingdom, the Pharisees were *spiritually blind* leaders of *spiritually blind* people. And because they were *not* planted in God's kingdom by the *Father*, they were going to *be uprooted* and cast aside. **

But the disciple, Peter, doesn't understand this parable, so Jesus tells the disciples it's not what goes into a person's mouth that defiles him; it's the words that come out that reveal the

wickedness in his heart. The defilement is already there, including all kinds of sin. He tells them flatly that eating with unwashed hands does not spiritually defile anyone.



And now we come to the second half of Matthew's message. Jesus is usually portrayed as a healer, compassionate and comforting and yet with the Canaanite woman he is initially dismissive.

This is yet another story that needs contextual background.

Jesus and his followers travel to the region of Tyre and Sidon, two Mediterranean seaside villages northwest of the Sea of Galilee and home to the Canaanites who were ancient enemies of Israel.

The Canaanite woman, whose name we do not know, offers an interesting contrast to last week's gospel reading. Where the storm-tossed disciples found it difficult to recognize and know Jesus, the Canaanite mother, like so many women in the gospels, does: she recognizes Jesus, she sees him, and knows what he can do.

"She addresses Jesus with all the right language. She calls him Lord. She recognizes him as the heir of King David. She pleads for mercy, imploring Jesus to heal her daughter. She is persistent, raising her voice, refusing to give in and the disciples complain, "She keeps shouting after us." (v23)

But what mother, what parent, wouldn't do the same? If you knew someone could save your child, would you ever quiet down?" ***

Frederick Buechner said, "The trouble oftentimes with religious people is that they try to be more spiritual than God himself."

And this includes Jesus.

Our two Gospel stories share similar lessons: in the first, Jesus schools the Pharisees, and in the second Jesus leans into spreading the Word beyond the house of Israel, responding with God's compassion that was in his heart.

As Rev. Barbara Kay Lundblad observes, "Jesus was converted that day to a larger vision of the commonwealth of God. He saw and heard a fuller revelation of God in the voice and face of the Canaanite woman." ****

At first, Jesus ignores the Canaanite mother, which is not surprising given the the history between their peoples. Eventually he responds, telling her that "*[he] was sent only to the lost sheep of ...Israel.*" (v 24).

She continues to beg for help, even at the cost of being humiliated when Jesus compares her to a dog.

According to author Jeffrey Stills, the actual word Jesus uses for dog means a “cared-for pet,” and he uses it to create a metaphor drawn from daily life. *****

In effect, he is saying...that it is not right to take the blessings that have been promised to God’s people and give them to the people who for centuries have rejected God and encouraged God’s people to do the same.

But the Canaanite woman’s culture differs from Jesus’; hers allows pets to be fed *while* the children eat. She swallows her pride and accepts her position in the Jewish society when she essentially says, “I am not asking for the children’s bread; only give me what they leave over and that will be enough for me.” *****

Her daughter needed healing and she was not going to fail in her quest. She wasn’t going to back down when the disciples complained. She wasn’t going to be shamed or belittled into silence, even by Jesus himself, who finally acknowledges, “*Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.*” (v 28)

The Canaanite woman leaves with the blessing she has wrestled from Jesus; she leaves with a healing for her daughter. ***

What comes out of her heart is faith.

In closing, a poem from her perspective:

Stubborn Blessing

Don’t tell me no.

I have seen you feed the thousands, seen miracles spill from your hands.

Like water, like wine, seen you with circles and circles of crowds pressed around you and not one soul turned away.

Don’t start with me.

I am saying you can close the door but I will keep knocking.

You can go silent but I will keep shouting.

You can tighten the circle but I will trace a bigger one around you, around the life of my child who will tell you no one surpasses a mother for stubbornness.

I am saying I know what you can do with crumbs and I am claiming mine, every morsel and scrap you have up your sleeve.

Unclench your hand, your heart.

Let the scraps fall like manna, like mercy for the life of my child, the life of the world.

Don’t you tell me no.

(Jan L. Richardson, paintedprayerbook.com)

Pastor Ross Cochrane concludes the Canaanite woman's thoughts:

He cuts across my sensitivities.

At the extremities of my despair I come to a sure realisation of who I am in the presence of a holy God and that I really don’t deserve anything from Him.

Yet in that place of exposure and despair He extends to me His grace, and mercy falls like lifegiving crumbs from His table to bring healing and wholeness to my world. *****

Amen.



Source quotes/adaptations include, but are not limited to:

- * "Why Words Hurt More Than Actions" by Rebekah Ratry, May 7, 2021, medium.com
- ** thebiblesays.com
- *** "A Mother's Determination," pastorjenniferpreaching.wordpress.com, August 19, 2017
- **** "Teaching Jesus," by Rev. Barbara Kay Lundblad, [Huffington Post](https://www.huffpost.com), August 9, 2011
- ***** "Jesus and the Canaanite Woman," June 26, 2020, jewsforjesus.org
- ***** A HEART LIKE A DOG (Matthew 15:21-28), *Words of Life: Empowering Conversations to Help You Apply the Lifechanging Truths of the Bible*, May 6, 2013, [Pastor Ross Cochrane Blog](https://pastorrosscochrane.com)

"The heart is not just the seat of the emotions but also the source of our fundamental commitments, hopes, and trust. And from the heart flow our thinking, feelings, and actions. What the heart trusts, the mind justifies, the emotions desire, and the will carries out."

~ Timothy Keller