

"Out of the Heart"
August 20, 2017
Text: Matthew 15:10-28

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Then Jesus called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles."

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

He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit."

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

Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 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."

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."

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

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."

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

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

“It’s not what goes into the mouth that defiles. What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart. That is what defiles.”

This is how Jesus settles the argument that happens just before this passage in the Gospel of Matthew. His disciples have been accused of not following the traditions of the elders; they have been observed eating without first washing their hands. What kind of religious leader could Jesus be if he allows his disciples to break a well known purity law? Add it to the long list of things Jesus does to turn the whole system upside down. This lesson, as with all of Jesus’ teachings, gets down to a matter of the heart and what is happening in there. What’s in the heart of the Pharisees? What’s in the heart of the disciples? What’s in the heart of Jesus? What’s in our heart? And what’s in the heart of the Canaanite woman?

The Canaanite Woman

The Canaanite woman. How and why does this character show up? Jesus and the disciples are on the move. They never stay in one place too long. It’s a traveling ministry; and even in the middle of today’s story they are off to another location. This time to Tyre and Sidon; up in the northern coastal regions in what is now Lebanon. It’s a land where Canaanites live; Gentiles—non-Jews. And here’s one shouting at them. It’s that feeling when someone’s just a little off. Their just a little too loud, and maybe even a little crazy. Never mind that she’s a Gentile crossing a boundary to engage a Jewish rabbi and his twelve disciples, or that she’s a woman crossing yet another boundary by engaging a group of men. Whatever the circumstance, she’s a total stranger who is shouting at them. But she is after something. And nothing is stopping her. Anyone with a child who needs help knows something about what drives this woman.

“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.”

Awkward Moments

But there’s no response. Jesus does not answer her at all. Her request just hangs out there unacknowledged. Jesus must have heard her. She addressed him by title and name. She said , *“Lord,”* and called him quite accurately as *“Son of David.”* But that’s insider language. That’s what his own people, the Jews, would know him as. It indicates his family line and speaks of God’s covenant with his people that the Messiah would come through the royal lineage of the house of David. The Canaanite woman has nothing to do with that, and yet she addresses him like someone who knows him. It’s that awkward feeling when an outsider suddenly behaves like an insider. When someone who shouldn’t have a clue somehow gets it more than anyone else.

Now, check your hearts disciples. What’s happening in your heart? The disciples come to Jesus and say, *“Send her away, she keeps shouting at us.”* Ah, these disciples. They always seem ready to send people away. Like when the hungry crowd of five thousand had no food, they asked Jesus to send them away. Or when children were trying to get to Jesus and they tried to send them away. And now this woman. Make her go away.

So, curiously, as if saying “You heard the men,” Jesus says to her, *“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”*

One More Boundary

No. No good. Her daughter has a demon. She is fighting for her life. She believes Jesus can and will heal her. She pushes past the men and kneels down in at Jesus' feet and says, "*Lord, help me.*" It does not matter that her people and Jesus' people have been estranged and hated each other for generations. Nor does it matter that she's a woman in a man's world. For her it doesn't matter what anyone says or thinks, when your child is sick, you keep trying to find a way to make her better. And now all boundaries have been smashed. Almost.

Jesus says to her, "*It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.*"

Check you hearts, disciples. You know that's how we feel about people outside of the fold.

Soon, Jesus would be crucified. And then on the third day he would be resurrected and then he would appear to the disciples. Before ascending to the heavens he would give them their mission to make disciples of all the nations. Not just in Judea, but also in Samaria, and then all of the world. Salvation through Jesus Christ would be opened up universally, and available to all. The only boundaries that could keep someone from knowing the good news of Jesus Christ would be the ones we construct and harbor in our own hearts.

Jesus says to her, "*It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.*"

Harsh words. What do you want from me Jesus? You want my heart? Here's is my heart.

"*Yes, Lord,*" she says, "*yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.*"

The Healing

What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart. And what words keep coming from her mouth? She calls him *Lord* every time she speaks to him, and she refers to him as Son of David. Even if he makes a harsh metaphor casting her in the role of a dog, she moves quickly in turn to cast him as the master whose crumbs will do her just fine. What resides in her heart is what she really believes. Earlier than most, this Gentile, this outsider, this person who finds herself at the bottom society believes Jesus is who he says he is. And she believes he is going to heal her daughter.

Check your hearts, disciples. This woman will get what she came for. Yes, she looks a certain way, she may act like a mess, but she knows the Son of David when she sees him.

"*Woman,*" Jesus now calls her, "*great is your faith!*" And her daughter is healed in that moment.

A Call to Cross Boundaries

What's in your heart? It matters. It all comes out in your words and in your actions. In the heart, Jesus says, reside all the problems. But the good news is that through Jesus, God is healing hearts. And when hearts are healed, lives are transformed. But who will cross boundaries to get to that healing? Who will fearlessly examine their own heart and open it so God can do the healing?

And who will boldly go to God on someone else's behalf for the sake of their healing? Or let's put it in clear terms for today; because we are very concerned about our country. We must be praying for our nation; it's heart is seriously ill. And we all agree that we need to pray. But who is ready to cross some boundaries and take it to the Lord like the Canaanite woman, believing that Jesus is who he says he is, and that he will heal our land? I pray we all find that kind of faith. Amen.