

## Only

*Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast  
Olentangy Church  
Columbus, Ohio  
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### **Matthew 15:10-28**

*Apparently Jesus allowed his disciples to eat without first performing a ceremonial hand-washing. This violated hallowed traditions regarding ritual purity. Some Pharisees expressed their disapproval. Jesus, in turn, expressed his disapproval of the Pharisees and their traditions.*

Then he called the people over and told them, “Listen and understand. What enters the mouth does not defile a person. Rather what leaves the mouth, this defiles a person.”

Then the disciples came and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard what you said?” He replied, “Every plant that my heavenly father has not planted will be torn up by the roots. Don’t bother with them. They are blind leaders. And if one blind person leads another blind person, both of them will fall into a hole.”

Then Peter said to him, “Explain the parable to us.” He said, “You still don’t get it either? You do know, don’t you, that whatever enters the mouth goes through the gut and is passed into the cess pit? But what leaves the mouth comes from the heart, and that defiles a person. Because pointless disputes and violence, adulterous acts and sexual corruptions, stealing, perjury, and slander – they all come from the heart. These are the things that defile a person. But eating with unwashed hands does not defile a person.”

Jesus left there and went to the territory of Tyre and Sidon. And a Canaanite woman from that area came and shouted, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David! My daughter is troubled by an evil spirit.” But he gave her no answer. Then his disciples came and made a request. They said, “Take care of her! Now she’s after us shouting.” But he answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

Then she came, humbled herself before him, and said, “Lord, help me.” But he answered, “It’s not right to take the children’s bread and to throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Lord, that may be true, but the dogs do eat the bits that fall from their master’s table.” Then Jesus said this to her, “Woman, your faith is substantial. For you, let it happen as you wish.” And right then her daughter was healed.

### **Sermon**

It’s puzzling, isn’t it, the way Jesus responds to the Canaanite woman? The woman comes to Jesus, pleading for her daughter, her daughter who has been ruined by an evil spirit, by something that’s gripping her and twisting her and refusing to let her go. The woman pleads. And Jesus ignores her. The woman falls on her face and begs for help. And Jesus calls her a dog. The woman gives a good answer, passes some kind of test. And only then does Jesus help her.

It’s more than puzzling. It’s troubling. This isn’t the Jesus we know. This isn’t the Jesus we turn to. Where’s the compassion? Where’s the mercy? How can he be so hard? So cold? So unwilling to help?

I did my research last week. I read numerous comments on this story. As a rule, everyone was puzzled by how Jesus responded to the woman. As a rule, they could only guess at what was going on. More often than not, they turned their attention away from Jesus toward the woman, toward the woman and her faith. The woman with her persistent faith. The woman with the kind of faith that teaches Jesus a lesson, that breaks him out of narrow confines. The woman with a faith that lets Jesus be Lord, even with his peculiarities, yet does not give up, does not let go.

But turning attention to the woman and her faith didn't seem right to me. More than anything, the Gospels are about Jesus, revealing God present and at work in him. My instincts and my theological training told me to stay focused on Jesus. So that's what I did.

**First off, let's notice what's going on in the Gospel just before this story.** Some Pharisees are challenging Jesus because his disciples don't practice the old tradition of ritual hand-washing before they eat.

To be a good Israelite required purity, a purity maintained in particular by avoiding external contamination. That's why the hand-washing. It wasn't about germs. It was about impurity, impurity that could be picked up by touching the wrong thing or the wrong person.

Jesus responds to this by saying that purity is not a matter of what a person comes into contact with. Rather purity is a matter of the heart. And purity is reflected in what a person thinks, says, and does.

**After saying this – and upsetting the Pharisees more than ever – Jesus heads to the area around Tyre and Sidon.** Talk about contamination! This is Gentile territory, and Gentiles are nothing if not impure. Rub elbows with them, and the impurity rubs off on you. But there goes Jesus, taking his disciples with him. There goes Jesus, with something in mind. There goes Jesus, with a point to make. Off he goes to Gentile territory, to dismantle the old tradition.

No sooner do they arrive than a woman approaches Jesus, a Canaanite woman. Well, of course, it's a Canaanite woman! Canaanite women and Canaanite men and Canaanite children were everywhere. This was their home. The woman approaches Jesus and begs him for mercy. She's heard of Jesus. She knows who he is. She acknowledges him as Lord. She claims him as the Son of David. And Jesus ignores her.

Well, of course, he ignores her. That's what the tradition required. Contact with any woman was always risky, if you wanted to maintain your own purity. Women, by definition, were impure at least half the time, and you couldn't tell when those times were, so you had best keep your distance. But this woman is a Canaanite, a Gentile. She's impure all the time. The tradition says have nothing to do with her or you will be defiled. So Jesus ignores her.

But the woman doesn't give up. She keeps shouting, trailing along behind the disciples shouting out for help, shouting so much that the disciples can't take it any more. "Just take care of her," they say to Jesus. "She's driving us nuts!"

The disciples don't want Jesus just to send her away. They want him to respond to her plea. (Most translations don't convey that. But it's there. It's the only way to make sense of

Jesus' response.) The disciples are ready to overthrow the tradition, to let Jesus get close to a Gentile woman, but not out of compassion, not out of principle, only for the sake of some peace and quiet.

But Jesus has an answer for them, an answer that won't prove helpful for the woman. He has a mission, he says, and he intends to stick to his mission, and his mission is not to Gentiles, but only to Israel. This mission sounds a lot like the old tradition. That tradition was focused exclusively on Israel. Israel the chosen people. Israel the holy nation. Israel the people of God. The tradition was focused on maintaining that identity, on keeping it pure and undefiled, and by doing so, being assured of God's blessing. "My mission is in line with that," Jesus says. "And I intend to stick to my mission. It's all about Israel. It's only about Israel."

The woman, of course, doesn't give up. She makes her way back to Jesus, falls before him, and simply says, "Lord, help me." Jesus, however, will not be turned away from what the old tradition requires. That tradition makes the place of Gentiles very clear, and they are not among the chosen of God. They are nothing more than dogs, disgustingly unclean, and the kingdom is not for dogs. So Jesus says he is not about to waste any bread, bread that he had multiplied for thousands – the disciples had seen it, the woman had probably heard about it – he is not about to waste any bread on Gentile dogs like this woman and her daughter.

Well, of course. This is where the tradition leads. This is what the tradition requires. This is what the Israel-only focus comes to.

But the woman is undeterred. She's not after a loaf, just one of the broken pieces that falls on the floor, one of the broken pieces that filled a dozen baskets after that meal in the wilderness. That's all she wants, and she says so. Jesus commends the woman for her faith, her substantial faith. And he grants her plea. Her daughter is well.

Faith, that's what Jesus found, faith. Not in Israel. Not among the Pharisees, the self-appointed guardians of purity. Not among the disciples, who, like the rest of the people, still didn't get it, still were obtuse, still were blind to what God was at work doing in Jesus. No. Jesus found faith in the area around Tyre and Sidon. He found faith deep inside Gentile territory. He found faith where it was not supposed to be, in a Gentile woman, in someone who was supposed to make him impure if he got too close to her!

**That's what I think is going on in this story.** Jesus is not cold, hard, unfeeling. No. He is simply launching an assault on the old tradition by showing where it leads. As if God's arm doesn't reach beyond Israel! As if only in Israel could there be faith! As if his mission could be restricted only to Israel, when God so loved the world!

Jesus warned that no matter how old, unhelpful human traditions would be torn up by the roots. And already Jesus had been dismantling the system of purity-based exclusion in Israel. He did it by calling and welcoming and, of all things, eating with tax collectors, prostitutes, and "sinners" – all of them impure, all of them having an impurity that would rub off on anyone who rubbed elbows with them.

By going to Tyre and Sidon, Jesus pushes the point even farther by showing the wrongness of excluding Gentiles. As if "impure" is the only thing that could be said about Gentiles! As if

they, too, could not have faith! As if it were not possible for them to recognize God present and at work in Jesus!

**Now I wonder how it is with the church today.** I wonder how we restrict our attention, our friendship, our love. I wonder how we limit the focus and reach of the Gospel. What I was wondering about the other day was Holy Communion.

It's an old tradition in the church to limit access to the Lord's Table. *The bread and the wine are holy and not for just anybody!* In the Christian Reformed Church, we used to say that Holy Communion was only for adult professing members in good standing, members who, in addition to having faith in Jesus Christ, had also formally endorsed the Reformed confessions. By the mid-1990s, we decided also to welcome children who had professed their faith in Jesus Christ. At synod a few years ago, we decided to welcome all baptized children, too. Then we said, No. A couple of months ago, we said, Yes, again. Sort of. There are still hoops to jump through.

But I wonder about all of this. I wonder about this tradition that places some people, or leaves some people, lots of people, outside the arms of God's love and grace. Only professing adult members. Only professing members, whatever their age. Only the baptized. I wonder what Jesus would think of our tradition and of its restrictions.

Sometimes we say that we want to guard the Table. But in Galilee and Judea, Jesus sat at the table and ate with all sorts of people. And now we need to guard the Table? Who from?

Sometimes we say that we want to save people from eating and drinking judgment on themselves. But why would that happen? If people are approaching the Lord, seeking the Lord, maybe not sure about what they're doing, but turning toward him any way – would the Lord turn them away because they haven't crossed over some line to make themselves part of the right group, to make themselves part of us? I wonder about that.

It may be a good rule not to feed dogs from the table. But what if those dogs aren't dogs at all? What if they are loved daughters and sons of God?

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**A Song** (Text: RAArbogast, 2011)

Your love, O God, is deep and true  
and wider than our hearts.

Your mercy, Lord, is firm and sure,  
the finest of all arts.

You reach to bless unchosen ones,  
the broken, bent, despised.

You lift the daughters and the sons  
held down by laws and lies.

Forgive our grasping, clutching hands  
that hold tight to your grace,  
forgetting it's a gift to share  
with all our fallen race.

Your love, O God, breaks down the walls  
of hate that tear apart.

Your goodness, Lord, binds up the wounds  
that plague the human heart.