

12th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 8.20.23

Matthew 15:10-28

Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: ¹¹ it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." ¹² Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" ¹³ He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." ¹⁵ But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." ¹⁶ Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷ Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰ 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. 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." ²⁶ 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. (355)

Tyre was a place far away—Tyre and Sidon. The city and region where Jesus has now gone, Tyre and Sidon were further away from Galilee than anywhere else he went according to the gospel narratives, about fifty miles away. This is to say, he had to have gone to real effort to be there.

What's more, Tyre is a city surrounded on all sides by the sea. It was, in Jesus' time, connected to land only by a causeway that Alexander the Great had built in the 4th century before Christ. An aerial map makes it look like a thought-balloon in a comic book, as if the mainland of Syria were but imagining it.

All this, though there doesn't seem to be a cause that had Jesus make such a journey. Our gospel writer doesn't ascribe this dramatic detour to any particular cause. So, I've always thought it was one more attempt on Jesus' part at retreat. He went to Tyre because he needed a break from the expectations of everyone around him, the need pressing upon him everywhere around Galilee that he went.

Because not only was Tyre far away. It was also populated by people wholly other from the Jews. The people there would have had little messianic expectation by which any might recognize

Jesus as someone come to meet that expectation. For his being so utterly foreign there, I figured he figured no one there would recognize him.

Funny thing about people with no real expectation: they're less likely to take offense. Offense is the result when what you expect goes totally unmet, when your carefully honored norms meet with disregard or even get broken.

The people there were Syrophenician. This wasn't a political problem, not anymore. Jews and Syrophenicians weren't enemies, not anymore. Time was they were—like during the long-ago time which we heard about last week, a millennium prior to this when Ahab was king of Israel and Jezebel had married into being the queen.

She had come from Tyre, and she brought a lot of that with her, most terribly the worship of Ba'al over and against the worship of the Lord, which meant quite possibly the return of the practice of the live sacrifice of children. A practice as abhorrent to modern sensibilities as it was, apparently, to Yahweh, the god of the Jews, it had been a painstaking pathway for the Jews to move away from such practice. But now, with Queen Jezebel from Tyre, it was encroaching back in. Like when someone you love has finally come free of some addiction, but you suspect they're sneaking the substance back into their life, Israel might succumb to such self-destructive practice.

That was a long time ago, now though, back when people from Tyre and Sidon were called Canaanites, not the more geographically specific, the less disparaging, "Syrophenicians." The difference between the two is like if I were to introduce to you visitors from Scandinavia by calling them Vikings. It'd be a funny unless I wasn't trying to be funny. Then I'm trying to be...what? Provocative? Regenerating a history and dynamic we've basically put to rest.

Our gospel writer calls this woman a Canaanite. There's little reason to be believe the writer was trying to be funny. Rather, it's like he was setting up an opportunity for offence.

There's something in this pair of stories that compare and contrast opportunities for offence.

The first story takes place in Galilee, not far from Jerusalem. Jesus has been healing people, any who came to him in any sort of need and even just had then the merest interaction with him, like touching the hem of his cloak.

After that, some religious authorities came from Jerusalem to ask about why Jesus was breaking with the tradition of the elders. He was keeping company with people who didn't themselves keep to the law. Even his disciples, those closest to him, had demonstrated a troubling lack of interest in the called-for orthodoxy.

Yet he acted as if he himself had authority, meaning (if he indeed was a man of such authority) he should know better and he should do better. Like when a police officer is speeding down the highway: what's that about? Aren't they supposed to be upholding the law, exemplifying obedience to it? Really, the priests had a point that, if Jesus is truly someone with authority, then he should also be exemplary; and the fact that he wasn't *offended* them.

Which worried the disciples, they even saying to Jesus as if Jesus might have missed it: "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?"

Jesus wasn't impressed by the priests' offence, though; and neither was he intimidated by it.

First of all, *they* weren't exemplary in upholding the law, which Jesus seemed to know, and maybe because everyone sorta knew it. Sad to say, it's easy to conjure up images of religious people who are the worst offenders of the norms they purport to hold sacred. In this case, there had crept into the conventions around the law things that were very much against the spirit of the law. In the name of their own righteousness, they deprived their families of due honor. In service of their own piety, they enjoyed entirely too much social power. Really, their strict adherence to the law had perverted righteousness more than promoted it.

Because the law, any law, is little more than a mechanism to enable righteousness. It is itself, though, not righteousness. And in fact, strict enforcing of any law can have the effect of *un*righteousness, even cruelty. Sad to say, it's easy to conjure up images of those who enforce laws doing so in a spirit of brutality. "I can't breathe," has become the cry of those who are victims of such brutal law enforcement. "I can't breathe."

Of course, Jesus has no truck with that, *had* no truck with that—such hypocritical, even brutal enforcing of the law. He knew that, for example, dietary righteousness had little to do with actual righteousness. It's not what goes into the body that makes a person clean or unclean, righteous or unrighteous. It's what comes out—for it's out of the human person that comes slander, or deception, or violation of the other. Truly, filth is less to be found in the works of creation that we might consume. (Remember, such as these were declared in the beginning to be good.) Filth is more to be found in the works of our own hearts that we might then express unto the world. (Remember, the human person has always been understood as both good, indeed very good, but also as ensnared in things very much not good. The human being is a much more ambiguous creature than any bird or birch or bumblebee.)

But the fact of Jesus putting in second place the law, which is to enable to righteousness, putting in first place actual righteousness: this is something deeply disruptive. Because how are we

to know what's right? How is it to be established what is right? Because religion is set up as a standard to measure what's right, a standard commonly held and recognized for the measuring of such things. Otherwise "right" becomes too plastic an assertion. Right can be what makes me feel good. Or right can be what is victorious—the loudest voice, the most forceful aggressor. Or right can be a matter of majority rule, which is always a flirtation with mob rule. Really, religious practice is set up in large part to establish in a common and recognizable way what is right in order for "right" to mean something rather anything and everything and nothing at all.

But now here comes someone who calls all such things into question. Now the established forms for achieving righteousness are to come in second place to vaguer, less measurable notions of forgiveness, respect, self-control, honesty, concern for the other. But how do you adequately measure and evaluate such as these?

It's no wonder they were offended at Jesus.

And it's little wonder, too, that the disciples were concerned about their having taken offence. They were intimidating, and they had power to punish, if in but small measure.

"You've offended them, Jesus. Don't offend them."

But perhaps that's on them, for being so easily offended. Some people seem to search for opportunities to take offense. I've actually come to suspect that this is the final purpose of social media. I've recently joined Reddit just to see what it's about. And this is what it largely seems to be about: highlighting things in life that put you in a state of high dudgeon. Posting video of that time when someone cut someone else off in traffic. Posting video of that time when someone was a jerk to someone else on the subway. Posting video of that time when one neighbor yelled at another neighbor to shut up with the loud music at the backyard picnic. None of these have any actual bearing on most viewers' actual lives. But, boy, are you offended at such jerky behavior now that you've seen it! And maybe, if you're lucky, *you'll* capture video some similar offence and you'll post it and you'll get attention for it and it will win you karma points. That's what you get for attention on Reddit: karma points. So keep your phones close. Keep those those cameras rolling!

Some people seem so easily offended, indeed searching for cause to feel offended.

Other people don't have that luxury in life. Other people are up against far more immediate threat, they can't waste their adrenaline on such numerous petty things.

I wonder if Jesus made the long journey to Tyre to test that theory, to get as far away from religious rectitude as he could, to see how people would react to him who had no expectation of how he should be but had every bit as much need of what he made present and possible, the

healing wholeness of God who is One and in whom all things shall be made One made manifest in this man who really seemed unlikely to fit the bill.

We should be clear that Jesus was being offensive to this woman. He implied that she was a dog, unworthy of what gifts he amounted to in the world.

The question when it comes to this story is always, why? Why did Jesus speak to her this way? Was he genuine in his belief that she was akin to a dog, since Syrophonecian and not an Israelite, since a Canaanite and not a Jew? Was he genuine in his belief that he had no duty or responsibility to this foreigner, and a woman at that, who really shouldn't be talking to him at all?

This story, told in both the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Mark, might here mean just this. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus' mission seems narrow and clear, that he is here for the house of Israel, that his purpose has only to do with them. Only at the end of this gospel narrative does this purpose shift dramatically, widen surprisingly. Jesus isn't just for one nation but is for all creation. So, this occasion in faraway Tyre, this moment between what had seemed an unworthy distraction, sort of like a dog, and this man of surprising authority: this moment might a cracking open of that. This woman would end up teaching Jesus something essential about himself and the world—that all are worthy, that all fall within the sphere of the Lord's concern. He was wrong. She was right.

I've thought that in the past. I've preached that in the past—that Jesus was speaking earnestly when he implied she was of as little value to him as a dog would be, which wasn't much; and that she taught him a lesson in expanding his understanding of what God is about in the world, the God of the Jews who would expand his concern far beyond this one nation of people and who would call into care every part and particle of this whole created order.

Today, though, I'm thinking a little differently, I'm thinking that Jesus decided to search out a world wholly other than the one he came from, a world where religious rectitude was hardly in play, was in fact a place of grotesque religious back in the day. Child sacrifice! These people were gross! No, indeed, religious rectitude would here be hardly in play. But the concerns that right religion is meant to account for and address are as common as they are anywhere.

This woman is suffering terribly.

Her daughter is sick.

Her daughter might die.

These people who were once all about their own children dying: not anymore. She's desperate, and she's not concerned about in what form help will come. She's not concerned about

what motivates the one who might help, or what his attitude might be about who she is in the world. She just wants help. She doesn't have the luxury of possibly taking offense.

The opposite of offense in Biblical Greek is faith. Offense is *scandalizo*, which comes to us in English as scandal or offense. And its opposite in the biblical understanding is faith.

I think Jesus wasn't looking for a break from being the Messiah, one so sought after, one so pressed upon. I think Jesus was looking for a break from religion, and religious people. Religious people can be so quick to take offense. Religious people can be shockingly short on faith.

The morality of this story rests on the question of whether Jesus was being offensive, and callously so; or whether his though giving cause for offense wouldn't be taken up, that this woman wouldn't take the bait, which he would somehow have known. Was it evident that she was greater substance than that? Not so easily ticked off. Not so easily triggered. Was this obvious about her? Could Jesus tell?

I don't know. This is never an easy story. It's never settled in my mind, or in anyone's mind according to the record of Christian tradition, what this story is to indicate—about Jesus and his Christ-hood, about foreigners and their place in the grand scheme of things, about whether the pious can handle Jesus possibly, apparently, being for a moment a jerk or if we need to write that out of the story, interpret it away, so intolerable would that be.

But lately, as I watch the world devour itself with little bites of little moments of taking offense, I've found this woman coming to mind. She of substance, with some internal ballast to steady her so she can keep her eye on what she needs (life for her daughter) and her focus on getting it and maybe even her good humor at making light of what Jesus said, which he might have meant to be taken lightly so to test his theory about these two opposites, offense and faith.

When emerging from the pandemic quarantine, when now reacquainting myself with my tight little world, populated with the same old people for these long twenty years of living in Lenox, when reacquainting myself with all those little and now long-ago times when this person hurt my feelings or that person didn't include my kid at their kid's birthday party, all those little moments of life hurting just a little bit and those hurts pinned to whomever was close to their infliction, my mantra was that I couldn't afford all my petty resentments anymore, all my carefully-nursed sense of offence. I just don't have that kind of time. We just don't have that kind of time. We must love and forgive and remember what's important.

Not that this is easy. Because some things we are right to be offended at. Some things are worthy of our sense of offence. The trick is to tell the difference between luxuriating in what

scandalizes us and meeting the injustices of the world with the substance of faith, that God is at work, and we can join in that work, laboring to make the world whole. All is not right. No, all is not right. But all is not finished.

Thanks be to God.