

STM Sermon August 16  
Jesus, the Teacher

Today's gospel has an interesting yet disturbing tone. In the ten verses preceding today's encounter the topic of discussion is -- what is to be considered "clean" and what is to be considered "unclean"? Jesus concludes that what comes out of the mouth defiles. What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, Jesus says, and is therefore the best indication of who or what is clean or unclean.

Following this conversation our lesson for today begins when Jesus and the disciples arrive in the district of Tyre and Sidon. They encounter a woman described as a Canaanite who is in need. She has a daughter who is tormented by a demon. This mother comes in desperation, ready to risk all to reach out on behalf of her child.

This unnamed woman addresses Jesus as Lord, Son of David, and asks for help for her daughter. Initially the disciples urge Jesus to send her away. Their tone no doubt conveyed disdain. After all, who is this Canaanite woman to approach us -- who does she think she is?

At first Jesus does not even respond. When he does speak he says to her, ***I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*** This was a strong and clear message of rejection to the woman that neither she nor her daughter was of the house of Israel. Such a damning and condemning response is so uncharacteristic of Jesus -- so uncharacteristic of the God that Jesus came to reveal.

Well, this woman would not take "no" for an answer and says -- ***Lord, help me.*** Jesus then answers, ***It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.*** What? What did Jesus say? Did Jesus call this woman a dog?

Now if she did not see how rude what Jesus said was before, surely she would see it now. Jesus basically just called her a dog! But this woman replied, **Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table.**

Don't you want to scream, excuse me Jesus? What did you just say? Or, to quote a sitcom star from the 1980's, **What you talking about Jesus?**

Beloved, what is going on in this passage? What are we supposed to conclude from this encounter? Jesus sounds misogynistic, arrogant, classist, bigoted - Jesus -- of Nazareth!

Well, let me offer this for your consideration. I echo the conclusion drawn by Joy J. Moore, a professor at Luther Seminary. Moore notes that Jesus was "voicing the prejudices of the onlookers." The disciples concluded that this unclean Canaanite woman needed to be sent away. They concluded that she was not of the house of Israel. She had to be unclean, right?

You see, the words coming out from Jesus's mouth were the sentiments of his disciples. To them this woman did not even have the right to ask for mercy.

Due to the woman's response one can tell that she would not be ignored. Apparently this Canaanite woman gets that the views that Jesus is expressing were not His own. She continues to pursue the healing for her daughter.

Jesus is teaching. He said, **I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel**, knowing that the disciples and many others had misunderstood the intent. Chosen had come to mean those who are better than – those who came

to “save the heathen” – those whom God loved best and most.

I am currently participating in a book group studying of the text, ***The Color of Compromise: The Truth about America’s Complicity in Racism***, by Jemar Tisby. Mr. Tisby shines light on much of what has brought about the great wounds and divisions around race in the American church. Our lesson for today – especially Jesus’ revealing words about the hearts of his disciples, brought many of the illustrations in this book to my mind.

In the gospel lesson the outcasts, those considered less than are the Canaanites and then add to it – a woman! What is interesting in Matthew’s gospel is that in the lineage of Jesus you will find those outside of the house of Israel. So, the Canaanites, the heathen, the outsiders of the 1<sup>st</sup> century are the marginalized, the poor, and the less *thans* of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Jesus responds to this unnamed woman. Jesus – perhaps through His demeanor, facial expression, tone of voice, must have somehow let her know that He heard her. She would not stop seeking because the mercy that she requests is not unreasonable. Beloved, when a seeker beholds what has been sought -- the seeker will not be turned away.

Jesus ends this encounter in a manner that no doubt astounded the disciples. Jesus says: ***Woman (not dog), great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.*** And the text ends by letting us know that her daughter was healed instantly.

Wait – Jesus said ***I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.***

To return to Professor Moore's reasoning, by responding to a cry for mercy with harsh and harmful words Jesus is actually dismantling the system of hierarchy, misogyny. Jesus is dismantling the practice of "othering" human beings -- yes, even a woman. Jesus exposes that which is unclean. After all Jesus said what comes out of the mouth is what defiles. What condemns, labels, wounds with words and exclusionary tactics -- builds walls and keeps children in cages -- that is what defiles.

This woman cried out for mercy. She called Jesus, **Lord, Son of David**. Yes she would even take the crumbs from the master's table if her daughter could be well. She would sit under the master's table if it brought deliverance to her child.

Well, what Jesus let's her know is that she need not earn mercy, she need not **settle for crumbs**. Jesus let her know that all are welcomed at the table. As a matter of fact, by the time Matthew finishes his Gospel Jesus leaves some mind-boggling instructions for these disciples who were from the house of Israel. He says, go into Jerusalem -- oh, that made sense. Go into Judea, well, that made sense. Then go into Samaria -- well... and to the uttermost parts is how the King James Version reads -- unto the uttermost parts of the world.

The invitation has no geographical boundaries, no hierarchal sentiments. Go into all the world and let the people know that all are welcomed. No need to gather the crumbs from under the table. A place is prepared for you at the table. Even the nameless are welcomed there. Even the broken are welcomed. Woman, you as well as your daughter are welcomed.