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Matthew 15:10-28

## WHEN THE GOSPEL GOES TO THE DOGS

Defilement comes from the heart. This is what Jesus taught his followers. He lived in a society that was preoccupied with purity rituals and matters. Religious purity laws regulated what a person could and could not eat, how to wash one's hands, what kinds of people a person could or could not associate with. To be pure, to be righteous, a person had to follow these strict purity laws.

But Jesus taught something different. He taught that defilement did not come from what went into a person but rather, defilement resulted in what came out of a person--out of their mouths and out of their hearts.

If we need a modern example of this, we have only to look to Charlottesville. In that rally we witnessed evil words shouted from the mouths and coming from the hearts of the marchers. Hatred, intolerance, racism, views of white supremacy were shouted by those claiming to have a righteous cause.

This display of ugliness is not new in our country. In fact, our nation has been wounded by the sin of racism from its very origins. Beginning with the treatment of the Native Americans by white European settlers, and then the capture and enslavement of African men, women, and children to advance the economic wealth of white citizens, and then the discrimination and abusive treatment of immigrant peoples from all over the world, our nation has a long and ugly history of racism which has wounded us and damaged us. Thankfully, we have also known a long history of prophetic voices in this land who have summoned us to reject this ugliness within our hearts, who have summoned us to higher standards of humanity, who have called us to live

out genuine justice and equality for all. We have wrestled with this national demon throughout our history and the struggle clearly continues.

The voices raised in Charlottesville rallied to return America to some distorted version of purity. But Jesus rejected all efforts to promote purity of tribe, purity of race, purity of family, purity of lifestyle, purity through obedience to dietary laws. Examine your hearts, he tells the crowd. It is what comes out of the heart that defiles.

And that is why we are rather surprised that at the end of this lesson, Matthew's gospel gives us this disturbing story about the Canaanite woman whom Jesus appears to initially exclude and even demean. She is a Canaanite woman we are told. That means that she is not Jewish, like Jesus and his disciples, but is a gentile. And Jews and gentiles did not associate together. In fact, gentiles were considered by Jews to be unclean, impure, to be avoided. But her daughter is ill and so this gentile mother summons the courage to cross these social divides to seek healing for her child. She has faith that Jesus can heal her daughter. But Jesus seems to ignore her shouts for help. And when his disciples want to send her away, Jesus offers these troubling words about how he was sent only to the children of Israel--that is, only to the Jews. He adds further insult by stating, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." He calls her a dog.

So, what are we to do with this Jesus, this Jesus who calls this desperate woman a dog? We want to rescue him in some way from being a narrow-minded doofus! Maybe, we think to ourselves, maybe Jesus was just testing this woman's faith--to see how persistent she might prove to be. Or, maybe Jesus was testing his disciples. Remember how they wanted to send her away? Could it be that all the while he was saying these disturbing words to this woman, he was really

looking at his disciples to judge their reaction--to see if they had yet learned about the true nature of the realm of God's love?

These are all possible. But what if, what if this story really offers us a picture of the very *human* Jesus? What if we are seeing Jesus here in all his genuine humanity: a man who himself was a product of his culture, his time in history, a man limited by his own narrow ideas about the scope of his ministry? Could this story reveal to us a very human Jesus who might have gotten something wrong?

And could it be that Jesus learns something valuable from this Canaanite woman? She was determined to secure healing for her daughter. After Jesus tells her it isn't right to give the children's food to the dogs, she responds that even the dogs deserve the crumbs that fall from the table. She is resolute in her faith that God's love and grace include even her, and if all she can take are the crumbs, those will be sufficient. She challenges Jesus' narrow thinking. It's not just Jewish lives that matter. Canaanite lives matter too! And confronted by her determined faith and her wise words, Jesus does an about face and praises her depth of faith and heals her daughter.

On that day, the gospel message went to the dogs. The boundary lines of God's love and grace were revealed to be limitless, and inclusive of all people. And we have this Canaanite woman to thank, being as most of us here today probably came to the Christian faith through gentile ancestry rather than Jewish ancestry. We have been included in the arms of God's embrace. As are all people. All people.

It may be that Jesus had to learn this himself. And if Jesus had to learn this, well then we probably still need to learn this, bound as we are by our cultural assumptions, our time in history, and our fears and insecurities. If Jesus can get something wrong, so can we. But if Jesus can

grow, and learn, and open his mind and heart to new ideas, well then, so can we. God's realm of love includes everyone.

The Christian story is fundamentally about God's inclusive love conquering all human exclusions and divisions. We humans are filled with exclusions and divisions. Our own personal brokenness divides us from who God intends us to be. Our collective brokenness leads to exclusions and divisions among us. And so we hate. And we kill. And we exclude. But God's inclusive love as revealed in Jesus conquers these exclusions and divisions. That is the core of the Christian message. That inclusive love is what Jesus invites us to let into our hearts. *That* is the secret toward true purity and true righteousness. God's inclusive love.

As people who embrace this belief in God's love of all people, we must oppose all forms of discrimination, exclusion, hatred, and injustice. We can, should, and must denounce racism and intolerance expressed toward people of any religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or gender. We can, should, and must resist evil, condemn bigotry, fight against injustice. We can, should, and must hold our nation and its leaders to a higher standard. And all the while we are doing this, let us also guard with great care our own hearts. As we condemn the racism displayed in Charlottesville, may we not neglect to examine how we are complicit in more subtle forms of racism, how we may benefit from unjust systems, how we may have absorbed narrow-minded view points. May we guard our hearts from self deception and from any sense of moral superiority. For no doubt, we all stand in need of learning more and growing more just and more inclusive.

And may we also guard our hearts from hatred--even hating the haters. Let us hate the behaviors and ideas we saw on display in Charlottesville. Let us hate the evil and injustice perpetrated in our land. Let us hate cruelty and poverty and neglect and apathy that cause so

much suffering. But let us guard against letting hatred toward any human being taking root in our hearts. Martin Luther King, Jr. warned against hating our enemies. We know the hardships he faced as he struggled for civil rights. We know the personal threats he experienced, the cruelty he suffered, the beatings and unjust imprisonments he experienced, how his own family and children were threatened. And yet, he struggled to resist letting hatred enter his heart. King believed while hatred could certainly cause harm to other people, it was especially damaging to the one doing the hating. He wrote that, "Hate distorts the personality of the hater. It is even more tragic, it is even more ruinous and injurious to the individual who hates."

Hate distorts, it diminishes, it damages, it defiles. Let us guard against hatred toward others taking root in our hearts. Jesus knew that whatever enters our hearts can enlarge us or diminish us. It can either bless us or defile us. Let us pay attention to our hearts, to the condition of our hearts as Jesus did when he had the courage to allow his heart and mind to be changed by the witness of the Canaanite woman.