

August 20, 2023: Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost

Main Idea: God doesn't want anything but earnestness from you.

Verses 21-28 of this Matthew text are deeply uncomfortable to read. However we interpret them, one thing is clear—Jesus and his disciples were rude (and, frankly, prejudiced) to a Canaanite woman who was begging them for help healing her possessed daughter. However, when they are prefaced by verses 10-20, an interesting thought experiment arises. Starting in Verse 10, Jesus tells the crowd gathered around him that what goes into the mouth cannot defile, but what comes out of the mouth can. In essence, Jesus is endorsing a purity of heart here. He is saying that you can't control your circumstances or the things that happen to you, so those things cannot define you. But you can control what you say and what kind of energy and intention you put into the world. So those things can define you. You can be held accountable to those things—the things that come from your heart.

This Canaanite woman is so driven by the love she has for her daughter and so genuinely faithful to what she knows of God's healing power that she does anything and everything she can to get her daughter help. She can't help that she was born and raised in a culture different from Jesus's. She can't help that she lives in a society where she is outranked by men. She can't help that her daughter was taken over by a demon. But she can control what she does about all of it. She can control what proceeds from her heart.

The things coming out of her mouth are things that build up faith and hope. She endures awkward and avoidant behavior from the disciples and from Jesus, and even engages them in conversation past a searing insult that Jesus throws her way because she believes that Jesus has what her daughter needs to get better. The things coming out of this woman's mouth are so good and so impactful that Jesus, himself, stops what he is doing and listens to her. He changes his mind about her.

Our words and our actions are the seeds from God that Jesus references in this passage—the seeds that God is planting. And while Jesus is encouraging us to speak to each other with earnestness, faith and intention, the Canaanite woman reminds us to speak to Jesus that way, too, even when it doesn't feel good. Her courage and slight cheekiness prove to us that authenticity resonates with God, and even helps to urge a response from God. Being intentional with what you put into the world can bring literal healing.

Scripture Summary

Jesus explained that words and actions have more ability to pollute or heal than what we put into our bodies. Then a Gentile woman challenges Jesus to heed his own words, and she is rewarded for her faith.



It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.



GOD'S WORD for Today

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First Reading: Genesis 45:1-15

45 Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, “Send everyone away from me.” So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ²And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. ³Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?” But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. ⁴Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come closer to me.” And they came closer. He said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. ⁷God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. ⁹Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, “Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. ¹⁰You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. ¹¹I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.” ¹²And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. ¹³You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.” ¹⁴Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. ¹⁵And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Psalm: Psalm 133

Second Reading: Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

11 I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ²God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. ²⁹For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. ³²For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

Gospel: Matthew 15: [10-20], 21-28

[¹⁰Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand: ¹¹it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” ¹²Then the disciples approached and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?” ¹³He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.” ¹⁵But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.” ¹⁶Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”] ²¹Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²²Just 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.” ²³But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” ²⁴He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” ²⁵But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” ²⁶He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” ²⁷She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” ²⁸Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.