

“Faith is Something Else”

Matthew 15: 10-28

Originally when I first picked this text, my plan was to preach on the Canaanite Woman’s faith, because after all, how cool is she, right? An outsider, speaking up for herself, reminding the disciples, and yes, whether we like it or not, even reminding Jesus that she is a Beloved Child of God and should be treated as such. Originally, I thought how timely this message of inclusion would be, thinking that it is just what we need to hear in a time such as this, a time when the world is so full of hate, a time when division and separation are driving the agenda.

Yet, the Spirit of God had a different plan. It kept bringing me back to the first part of this text, this part which too often we skip over, simply so we can get to the good part, to the easy part, and yes...admittedly so we can get to the more pleasant part to hear and experience. The Spirit of God kept bringing me back to the verse which says, “It is not what we put into our bodies which makes us unclean. But rather, it is what comes out of our mouths that does so.”

We need to realize that this verse follows a larger conversation which Jesus has with the Pharisees and the scribes. This group of religious leaders have come to Jesus once again, complaining about the disciples’ behavior. It seems like the disciples are not washing their hands before they eat.

Now let me stop right there and say as a mom, as someone who likes eating in restaurants, I get it. Because as Laura Riddle always says, “Wash your hands and say your prayers because germs and Jesus are everywhere.” Washing hands before eating is not only polite. It is a necessary health concern because Lord knows where people’s hands have been or what they have been touching.

But let me be real clear here. This story is not about washing hands. This conversation between the religious leaders and Jesus is about control. Jesus and his disciples are not following tradition. They are not doing what the religious leaders think is right or acceptable behavior. In fact, Jesus and his disciples are doing the exact opposite of what the religious tradition allows. They are eating with outsiders. They are inviting these supposed outsiders to the Table. They are recognizing the people on the margins as Beloved Children of God and by doing so, expanding the Welcome of God beyond social norms at that time.

The Pharisees and the scribes come to Jesus, wanting him to bring his disciples back in line. To which Jesus responds by basically saying as people of faith, we don’t get to pick and choose which texts from our sacred story we are going to follow and which ones we are going to ignore. Being a person of faith, being in relationship with God, being in relationship with others, others who are also Beloved Children of God, made in the image of God, as people of faith, we need to realize being in community with others is an all or nothing thing.

Jesus then goes on to say, “For the sake of your tradition, you make void the Word of God. He even goes as far as bringing words from the prophet Isaiah into the conversation which say... The people honor me with their lips but their hearts are far from me.

And Jesus doesn't stop there. He turns to the crowd and says “It is not what goes into the body which defiles. Rather it is what comes out of the body through the mouth which defiles. And the reason for this is that what comes from our mouths originates in our hearts. It is how we truly feel. It is what we truly believe. It is what drives how we practice our faith. In other words, as people of faith, we need to practice what we preach.

So if we continue this way of thinking...If grace and love reside in our hearts, then as people of faith we will speak grace and love in all that we do and say, right? Seems simple enough.

However as the week progressed, I was reminded again and again just how hard it truly is to live out these words because the thing of it is...accepting a principle in theory is not the same as actually engaging it in real life. Let me say that again: Accepting a principle in theory is not the same as actually engaging it in real life. That's the ouch moment of the morning for us. In seeing these two stories

together, the story of the Pharisees and the story of the Canaanite, we discover again that being a person of faith is easier said than done.

Let's be honest, it is easy for us to sit here some two thousand years later, judging these religious leaders which we read about in our Bibles, saying we would never be like them. We always practice what we preach. But if we are really being honest with ourselves, haven't there been times in our lives when we didn't speak up? When our practices didn't exactly match the grace and love we preached or heard about in our churches? Haven't there been times in our lives when we praised God with our lips, but in our hearts we were far from our God or times when what came out of our mouths displayed hurtful intentions?

I'm not asking anyone to speak up and answer these questions because truth be told, I don't want to start rummaging through the skeletons in my own closet. I would rather not admit to all the times when my very own words and actions added to the brokenness of the Body of Christ, to admit I have not always practiced what I preached, that I have treated the words of Jesus, words that call us to love our enemies, words that tell us do unto others as we would do unto them, words that clearly tell us if you do not welcome one of my Beloved Children, you do not welcome me, I'm not sure that I want to admit that too often I have treated Jesus' words of love and grace as nice suggestions rather than allowing them to become a part of my being, become a part of my heart.

Knowing what Jesus asks of us, it is hard not to be a little uncomfortable right now, but given what is going on in our world right now, uncomfortable is exactly the place we as people of faith need to be and feel. We need to realize that living and being a person of faith is not about having cool catch phrases, phrases which we spout off without ever having really thought about their meaning for our words and our actions. We need to realize that faith is something else entirely. Our faith calls us to engage in the really difficult conversations, to name the times when we failed to be the people God calls us to be, not only in our words but also in our actions. Our faith calls us to admit that we have a long way to go before we truly practice what we preach, a long way to go before we preach what we practice.

That's why many commentators believe Matthew put these two seemingly different stories together...the story of the Pharisees and the story of the Canaanite women's faith, that Matthew put these stories together to make his community deal with the fact that our faith is not a theory. It is a way of being. It is a way of relationships. Matthew wanted his community, wanted his readers to ask the hard questions about their life together, to examine how they were truly living out their faith as people of God. He wanted to make his community, make his readers confront all the things that nullify their witness to God's amazing grace and love because....because Matthew knew healing and wholeness could not happen, would not happen until all the divisions, the ones the world created and the ones we create

as well...Matthew knew that healing and wholeness for all of God's children could not happen until as people of faith, we practiced what we preached, no ifs and or buts. And today seems like a pretty good time to start.

Because the funny thing is, God has an amazing sense of timing. I'm sure that everyone has heard there is a solar eclipse happening tomorrow and if you haven't, then let me just say don't go out tomorrow around 2:30 p.m. and look directly at the sun. Everyone is fascinated by this phenomena. Schools are closed. People are taking off work just to experience this moment in time.

Now I would be remiss in my duties as a preacher if I didn't mention that not only does the eclipse have physical effects on our lives. It is said to have spiritual effects as well. No I'm not talking about the second coming or that it is a sign of the end times.

No what I'm talking about is the ancient rabbinic tradition from the Talmud, a sacred text among the Jewish faith. It states that at the time when the sun is eclipsed, it is an unfavorable period for the world. They believe that the solar eclipse became God's way of showing God's sadness, anger, hurt, and yes, maybe even displeasure with God's people. The ancient tradition states that an eclipse is almost like a cosmic reset button, leaving the world in darkness for just a moment until God's light comes shining through again. Of course, the ancients are quick to

say that God's light never ever is really blocked during these times of darkness, that there are still shafts of light surrounding the darkness, "rays of hope," which remind us that even during the dark periods of life, we are to look for those small signs that tell us that G-d is still with us."

The more I think about this, and the more I look around at what is going on in our world, I kind of like thinking that Monday's solar eclipse is a reset button for us as the Body of Christ, that we have a chance to name the darkness, the darkness of all the times when we failed to be the people God called us to be, to name the darkness of when our actions did not match the words of love and grace we said in our communities of faith. I kind of like knowing that although we have an opportunity to name the brokenness that fills our world, to be in the darkness for a moment, we also know it is a time of new beginnings. We know that even in the darkness, there are still rays of hope, surrounding us, rays of hope challenging us to engage Jesus' words of amazing grace and love, not just as theories we like or faith catch phrases we can spout off at a minutes notice. Rather, tomorrow, when the world goes dark for just a moment, let us see that we have been given a chance to reset, to restart, we have been given another chance to practice what we preach as we continue to become the people of Welcome God calls us to be. May it be so. Amen.