

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
Proper 15, Year A, Year A
Matthew 15:10-28

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We begin with the birth of Jesus. Jesus enters the world in the humble form of a newborn, unable to walk or talk. Jesus has to learn language. Jesus has to learn the coordinated movements involved in walking for the first time. As he grows, this process of learning continues. In fact, Luke 2:52 describes Jesus' teenage years by saying, "Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and humanity."

Since we know that Jesus learns and increases in wisdom, there is no need to expect that Jesus suddenly stops learning when he begins his ministry. Jesus' wisdom continues to deepen and expand. In today's gospel passage from Matthew 15 we get to see that deepening and expansion taking place.

The passage begins with Jesus saying "it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." To us, all of the elaborate dietary laws in the purity code of Leviticus may seem arcane. But remember that in Jesus' time they were extremely important. It was an abomination to eat pork or shrimp. To eat food that was not kosher was to violate The Clear Teaching Of Scripture. To eat food that was not kosher was to violate Centuries of Tradition. To eat food that was not kosher was to abandon your Religious Identity.

The disciples come up to Jesus and say, "The Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said." Yeah, no wonder. Jesus is challenging the things they hold sacred. And Jesus replies, "Let them alone, they are blind guides of the blind." This is so radically different from anything Peter has ever come across that he asks for an explanation. Jesus replies to Peter, "Are you still without understanding?" So Jesus explains the whole thing, bodily functions and all: "Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile." Jesus is saying that faith isn't about following rules. Faith is about what's in your heart. That's Jesus' message: faith isn't about following rules; faith is about what's in your heart.

That teaching is directly related to what happens next. A Canaanite woman comes up to Jesus. A Canaanite is a non-Jew. There are various words people use for those outside their own religion. Gentile. Heretic. Infidel. You get the idea. And she's shouting. "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." And Jesus doesn't answer her at all. And his disciples, not surprisingly, urge him to send her away. Jesus explains to her, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." A fairly polite answer. But she does not give up. She comes over and kneels in front of him, an action that is a pretty amazing combination of humility (kneeling) and boldness (right in front of him). And in three words she expresses that combination of humility and boldness: "Lord, help me." And now Jesus is not so polite. He answers, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Again, she has both the humility to receive his comparing her to a dog, and the boldness to keep pressing for what she wants: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

And in that moment Jesus realizes the full implications of what he's been teaching all this time. Faith isn't about following rules. Faith is about what's in your heart. Here's a woman who doesn't follow the religious dietary rules. Jesus has just said, "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles...what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles." So now is he going to tell her she's defiled? Or does he now recognize that what comes out of her mouth proceeds from a heart that is good and faithful? He has preached his message: Faith isn't about following rules. Faith is about what's in your heart. He tells the woman, "Woman, great is your faith!" Now he has learned to see the faith in the Other. Now he practices what he preaches, "Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Her daughter's life is changed forever. The Canaanite woman's life is changed forever. And Jesus' life is changed forever. In recognizing the faith in someone who is Other, and responding to that faith, Jesus also recognizes that his own mission in life is much bigger than being sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Jesus recognizes that his mission in life is to be sent to the entire world.

When you think about it, it is an extraordinary role to play in the life of Jesus. While Peter is still scratching his head, the Canaanite woman totally gets it. She pushes enough for the full implications of Jesus' ministry to open up.

While some preachers complain about what a difficult passage this is to preach on, I am profoundly grateful for this scripture and the depths of meaning it provides for us. Here in this scripture, we get to watch as these two people do two extremely difficult things.

All of us have seen situations in which there is a big gap between the values someone says they hold, and the way they actually act in reality. And it often seems strange to us that this gap that is so obvious to us is something they insist does not exist. If anyone points out the gap, the most common initial response, and often only response, is denial. The reason that gap persists is that thinking about the lofty values we espouse brings up pleasant feelings. If we look at our actual behaviors and the gap between them and our values, it brings up unpleasant feelings in us. Since we do not like to feel unpleasant feelings, we simply deny that the gap exists. Sometimes we do this so automatically that we don't even notice it; other times our denial is vociferous and even angry. Here is what is extremely difficult: when someone points out that gap, to be willing to tolerate the unpleasant feelings so that we can learn something. Because tolerating the unpleasant feelings so that we can learn something is the way to close the gap so that we are actually living what we believe.

That is why today's gospel passage is so valuable. In it, we see the way the Canaanite woman does something difficult: with both humility and boldness, she points out the gap between what Jesus is saying his values are and what he is actually doing, which is at this point incomplete. Even more important, in it, we see the way Jesus does something difficult: he tolerates the unpleasant feelings of her pointing this out to him, and instead of denying it, he is able to learn from it, and close the gap by changing his actions to bring them in line with what he believes. Learning involves a willingness to acknowledge where our previous awareness has been incomplete, even when that involves unpleasant feelings. Jesus is a good example for us, and his willingness to learn in this conversation with the Canaanite woman is an extremely important part of that good example for us. He is willing to learn from a conversation with someone on the margins of society, someone not of his religion, not of his gender, not of his nation. Jesus has learned how to walk and talk, and here he has learned how to fully carry out his ministry not just to one group of people, but to all people.

On Wednesday, I went to a workshop at Stratford Hall which featured a showing of a film entitled "American Denial." It was shown on PBS, and you can find it online. The film began by talking about the way the Carnegie Corporation in 1939 wanted a scholar to study

racial issues in the United States, and they wanted this scholar to come from outside the United States so that they would get an outsider's view. They chose a highly accomplished scholar and economics professor from Sweden, Gunnar Myrdal to do this research along with his wife Alma, who was also brilliant scholar. As I watched the beginning of the film, I was eager to get to the results of his research, and was getting a bit impatient that they were talking about the researcher himself. Then as the film went on, I was drawn in to the fascinating parts of the story. Myrdal had been a great admirer of American ideals. But when he arrived in the American South and began talking to people, saying things such as, "I'm from Sweden and we don't have any Negroes there. What are they like?" he was appalled by the answers he heard. When he talked to black people, and saw the horrifying conditions they lived in, the degradation that whites imposed on them, and the lynchings and other forms of violence against them that white people carried out, he was even more appalled. In his research, he wrote about American beliefs, what he called, "the American Creed" and the way that the reality of whites' behavior toward blacks was in direct conflict with those beliefs, while white Americans continued to deny that there was anything wrong with how they were behaving. As Myrdal faced the enormity of the problem in America, it caused a crisis in him. And what I found particularly fascinating is that his wife Alva was also pointing out the gap in him between what he said he believed about equality between men and women, and how he was treating her in reality. The film explored the letters they wrote each other. He tried to resort to denials. Alva wasn't having it. Even at great cost to herself and her family, she persisted. Eventually, Gunnar was able to tolerate even the deeply unpleasant feelings that came from recognizing that the way he liked to think of himself and the way he was acting toward his wife were not the same, to stop the denial, to learn from her, and to change his behavior to close the gap. She came back to him. It was then that he was able, with her help, to finish his book, entitled *An American Dilemma*.

The film also included interviews with modern scholars on race, including Michelle Alexander, about the ways racial inequalities and racial bias have continued into the present day, and the ways that Americans' denial about them has also continued. Of course, I was watching all this after having seen the way Nazis, the KKK, and other White Supremacists converged at the Unite the Right rally, with torches and weapons, and after having seen their hatred and violence. I was watching the film after having seen the variety of responses to it.

I was driving Kendall to college in Ohio last weekend, so I wasn't in Charlottesville at the counter-protest for equality and justice with my fellow clergy and bishops, nor was I here to preach about it on Sunday. I will take this opportunity to say that Naziism and White Supremacy are unequivocally wrong and evil, and are totally antithetical to the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And there is more to it than that. Since we all live among a society that has as many racial inequalities as ours does, on everything from who has money and power to who gets incarcerated, we inevitably absorb racial biases from our environment despite our good intentions. Regardless of whether we like to think of ourselves as colorblind, we are fooling ourselves if we think any of us emerges 100% pure of any racial bias whatsoever. And since issues of race are one of the areas in which it is hardest for us to admit that there may be a gap between the values of our society and the way our society actually operates, and in which it is hardest for us to admit that there may be a gap between our values as an individual and the way we as an individual actually operate, the denial makes the problems of that gap even more difficult to solve.

So I am particularly grateful for our scriptures. I am particularly grateful for the good example of the Canaanite woman, who has the faith in Jesus to persist in pointing out to him, with humility and boldness, the gap. I am particularly grateful for the good example of Jesus, who is willing to tolerate some unpleasant feelings, who is willing to see the great faith of the Canaanite woman, who is willing to learn, who is willing to make complete the ministry God calls him to. It is my prayer that all of us will continue to strive to do what we can to follow the good example of the Canaanite woman, and to follow the good example of Jesus.