

Lowdown Love: A Sermon on Matthew 15:10-28

Co-missioners,

We're four weeks shy of a Sunday that will rub our faces in Matthew's tough account of Jesus' back-and-forth with the Canaanite woman. Today we send you an example—in advance for once—of how this text can be tapped so that it gushes with Gospel for 2023. Feel free to borrow ideas, or even better, to improve on them.

Our editor preached this sermon three years ago at the church he served for twenty-eight years in suburban Cleveland. He encourages this year's batch of preachers not to chop off the first half of the text as the lectionary tempts one to do.

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

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by Jerome Burce

What we listened to just now was a case of Jesus practicing what Jesus preaches. It came with an implicit order for all of us who follow him to do as he says—and does—right here in Cleveland in 2020.

This means as always that we have some rethinking to do—or, as

we say it in Bible English, some repenting.

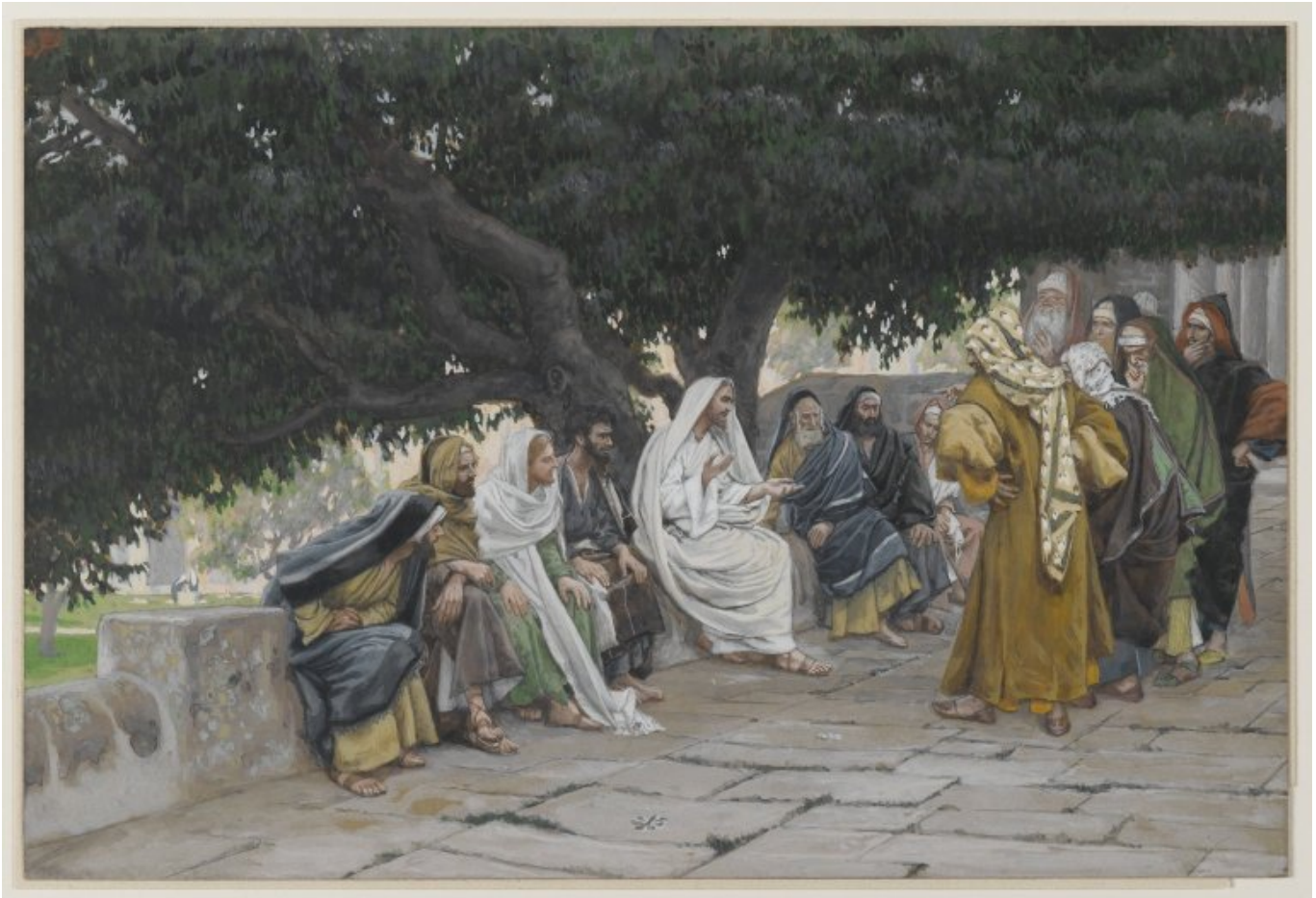
That's especially so this morning as Jesus takes a standard human idea and turns it completely on its head. He has a knack for doing this as a lot of you, I'm sure, will have long since noticed.

And with that, let's dig into it.

The issue this morning is holiness, or in plain English, being special—special in the way God wants his hand-picked people to be special. In the story we heard, these hand-picked people are Jesus' disciples. His clueless disciples, as we notice again and again. Today they're baptized types like you and me—God's chosen bunch, as we heard St. Peter call us a few months ago. In this 21st century there are lots and lots of these people scattered all over the world. When it comes to the matter of God's kind of special and what that's about, most all of them—most all of us—are about as clueless as the disciples were.

Those disciples were all too stuck on the old familiar notions of “specialness” that Jesus came to undercut and replace. So are we. So is humanity in general. Sinful humanity, to use a Bible word again.

Remember after all what sin is about in the first place. God makes a man and a woman in his image, after his likeness. That's as special as special gets. But then the two swallow a snaky suggestion that they aren't quite special enough.



The Pharisees and the Sadducees Come to Tempt Jesus – James Tissot (1836–1902)

From [Wikimedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:James_Tissot_-_The_Phariſees_and_the_Sadducees_Come_to_Tempt_Jesus.jpg)

It's not enough that they're looking down on the whole of God's magnificent creation as its God-appointed caretakers, it's "over-seers." What they really need, the snake says, is to be looking down on God as well—or if not down, then at least eye-to-eye with God as equals. And so they go for it. With that they launch the endless contest that consumes their descendants to this very day. You can see kids practicing it on every playground at every school in every country the world over. Who's up, who's down. Who's in, who's out. Who's cool and attractive, and who, by contrast, is plain and ordinary, another measly member of the common kid-herd.

No one teaches children to play at these games, by the way. They

just do it. It comes naturally. Later they grow up and the games continue, but with a lot more intensity. There are Joneses to keep up with, as we used to say. There's that school to attend that accepts only ten percent of the A-plus students who apply to it. There's that group you'd like to join, the one that people with all the right connections belong to. It's very selective, as they say. And once they let you in—if they let you in at all—you get to revel in the special feeling of sitting with the chosen few looking down on the great mass of people below who couldn't make it no matter how hard they tried or how rich they were. They don't have the right manners, you know—or some such thing.

As for the great mass of the excluded, they were born with a lust for that special feeling too, so they get it by identifying with wider and broader groups. Their nation. Their region. Their language. Their accent. Yes—absolutely—their skin color. Their political party. Their football team. Their religion. Their particular flavor of Christianity. “I thank thee, Lord, that I wasn't born Catholic,” as a lot of Lutheran used to pray, and some perhaps still do. Vice versa, I'm sure. I can't help but feel pretty glad I'm not a Baptist.

And with that I'm putting my finger on something that has got to have our Lord Christ still grinding his teeth in frustration with the people he calls his own. It's that we should dare for a moment to drag him into the better-than-thou games that sinners insist on playing with each other.

What's special about Jesus, you see—what sets him apart from every other human being—is his utter refusal to play the game at all or to have anything to do with it. And with this comes his fierce determination to put an end to it once and for all. That's what the Father sent him to do. It's what he died to accomplish.

And that's what this morning's two-part Gospel reading is driving at. Here is Jesus at work in word and deed to expose the game for the wicked nonsense that it is.

So first we have Jesus wrapping up a conversation about what does or doesn't set a person apart from the common herd. What kicks the conversation off is a complaint from the Pharisees about his disciples—which, of course, is really a complaint about him. Here's the problem as the Pharisees see it. Those disciples aren't sticking to the special rules that are meant to set God's tribe apart as special people, distinct from the riffraff.

One of the rules is that you wash your hands before you eat. Not that first century Pharisees knew germs the way my mother did when she got after me about this way back when. For them the issue is doing something uncommon, as in over the top, a thing that "those people" don't do. It's a matter of sending a signal that you're better than the standard human herd, more connected to God. When I read the text just now you heard the word "defile" come up. A poor choice by the translators, I think. We hear "defile" and we think "dirty." The Greek behind the word has more the sense of "plain" or "ordinary." Every day. Run of the mill. Un-special. Like blue jeans versus a gown or tuxedo. In God's eyes, we're the gown-and-tuxedo bunch. Not like the blue-jeaned Romans, or worse still, those Canaanites up north in their tattered rags. That's what washing the hands is meant to signify. And look, the Pharisees say, your guys aren't doing it. God can't be happy.

I can't help but think of all the rules that Christians have invented over the years to flash their specialness. No drinking. No dancing. Don't ever play cards. No meat on Friday. Lately it's "stay away from certain pronouns when you talk about God"—if, that is, you want to be a card-carrying member of the

Christian in-crowd.

Again I hear the teeth of Jesus grinding in frustration. What's with these people of his who do not get it? It's not a failure to keep superficial rules that spoils a person and makes God wrinkle his nose. Instead it's that lust, welling up from every sinner's heart, to put myself first; to despise my neighbor instead of loving her. At its worst it gives rise to all those ugly things Jesus mentions: murder, fornication, theft, slander. If I say I have nothing to do with such things, God goes a step beyond the nose-wrinkle rolls God's eyes. God sees what's in my heart, does he not? God also sees what lies concealed in the systems, the history, the culture, the way of life that my heart is attached to, that I benefit from, and always at someone else's expense.

Let no one try to tell God that he or she is not so great a sinner as those other rascals are, and that's what makes us special. We might fool each other on that score, but we can't fool God. Where self-centered sin is concerned, I'm as run-of-the-mill as run-of-the-mill gets—and there's nothing I can do to change that.

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And with that, my Lord Jesus Christ rolls up his sleeves and flashes the one thing above all other things that sets him apart as the Best Person Ever.

It's his everlasting willingness to clamber down from his lofty throne and mingle with the nameless riffraff, beginning the ones way at the bottom that everyone else looks down on.

To him they are dear beyond all understanding.

We see this ever so clearly in the second part of the Gospel reading.

As if to cinch his point about what is and isn't special, Jesus heads for country where the wretches live, northwest of Galilee. These are people whose ancestors worshiped the god Baal. They have nothing to do with the rules of those polite "God-fearing" people to the south. They talk funny, they smell funny, they eat unpleasant things; they have habits and ways that make your hair curl. It's hard to like these people. It's so easy to despise them.



*Christ and Canaanite woman – Annibale Carracci
(1560–1609)*

From [Wikimedia Commons](#)

No sooner does Jesus step on their turf, then along comes this woman. This frantic, pushy, ignorant, insistent woman with the crazy daughter. She's as bottom of the barrel as it gets. No self-respecting person would waste a moment on her. You get the feeling that this would be the case in her own home village.

What stands out in the story is the way she approaches Jesus. Shouting, as it says in the translation I read. Shrieking would be a better way of putting it. It's not a pleasant sound that's coming from her mouth, and she isn't saying please.

I remember the sight and sound of women like this in the country I grew up in, and I remember how their neighbors treated them, the men in particular. With utter and open contempt. Laughing at them, as if they were dogs.

Maybe that's why Jesus responds to her as he does. To show us up. So first he models our own behavior. He ignores her. When that doesn't put her off, he makes an excuse for not helping her. When she keeps on begging he insults her by calling her a dog. An undeserving dog, no less. Only then, when she turns that back on him—when she says that even the dogs get crumbs that fall from the table—the tune changes completely. And what this woman gets is the best compliment Jesus could possibly give. “Great is your faith!”

This woman is one of only three or four people in all the Gospel accounts that Jesus says this too. And all the others, like her, are people on the outside looking in, as bottom of the barrel as it gets.

“Be it done for you as you ask,” Jesus says. “Your daughter is healed.”

And with that he sends a signal for the ages. He also sets up a standard of the faith he so wants to see in each and every one of us today.

This is what Jesus signals in this episode. He is here to save and rescue every human being, no matter who they are or how they are, or where they are, or what they look or sound or smell like. No one is dearer to him than those that others despise.

What makes Jesus special—what sets him apart as uniquely, completely uncommon—is his impossibly high regard for the un-special, the ones at the very bottom of the great human heap. There's not a chance that a one of them would ever get admitted to the clubs we join, or to the circles of our friends. A lot of us don't want them in our country—and here I can't help but think, inevitably, of those desperate, frantic women from Central America who have washed up with their children on our southern border, to say nothing of those other people we'd far

prefer to see on the other side of town. They're much too poor and much too black, to be perfectly blunt about it. The Section 8 people, as we've lately come to say. Shame on every Christian person who has ever thought such thoughts—and that, I'm afraid, includes most all of us to one degree or another. Shame on me.

So here comes Jesus this morning to deal with the sinner that I am and the sinner that you are. Because, you see, dealing with sinners—which is to say, lowering himself to our sinful level to deal with us—that *is* the Jesus' thing; his extra-special uncommon thing. It's what sets him apart as the new definition of what "special" really is: this willingness to get down and dirty for the un-special likes of us. And this Lord and Savior Jesus Christ wants all us, you in particular, to trust him this morning. To trust that he will do this right now where you are concerned. He wants you to trust this honestly, in full awareness of how low he really does need to go to love you where and how you need to be loved. He wants to hear you crying out for help—for the Spirit and the power to combat and drive out the loveless demon that continues to addle your Christian wits, just as it does with baptized people the world over. He wants you to look and sound like that Canaanite woman who will not let herself imagine that Jesus could ever give up on her.

Now talk about special—this woman of great faith. And here you and I sit this morning with vastly more reason than she had to exhibit that faith. We have seen what she has not. We have seen this Christ lower himself so far, that there he hangs on a cross between two thieves with all the world jeering at him as he dies. And yet for their sakes—for the thieves and mockers alike—die Jesus does. He dies for your sake too.

He dies so that this morning—this very morning—here he can be, his body, his blood, in *this* bread, *this* wine, given for *you* to eat and drink. Given so that the great work his Spirit began in

you when you were baptized so long ago will be nurtured and strengthened and continued. Given so that you and I might begin to look like the special person Jesus is. Special people whose “special-ness” has nothing to do with setting ourselves apart from the common herd, but rather with going to where those people are who need love the most, and there to love them genuinely and gladly as Christ continues to love us all.

Over all my years at this church I’ve seen this love welling up now and then in so many of you. Join me in thanking God when you see it too. Love of that kind is the very thing that has always marked the Church at its best. It doesn’t sit on high to criticize and judge and write the wretches off. Instead, it scrambles down with open arms to love whoever it is that God would have us love in Jesus’ name, for Jesus’ sake. This includes the snobs who haven’t figured out what their problem is yet.

God grant us all such faith, such remarkable love.

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
A publication of the Crossings Community