

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, Gospel Year A

Getting to the Heart of Things

Matthew 15: [10-20] 21-28

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Chris Repp

[Then 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 offence 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.

Author’s Note: The optional sections of this pericope (I would include vv. 1-9 as well) are crucial context for the main text. In vv. 21-28 I see Jesus bearing the sin of his people into this encounter and losing the argument for the sake of this woman—a figurative crucifixion for the salvation (healing) of her daughter. This is the key to my analysis. (It would be very much a shameful thing in this culture for a man of status to be bested by a woman of no status. This is still true in many ways in our own culture, is it not? Note the recent exchange between Representatives Ted Yoho and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.)



DIAGNOSIS: Heart Trouble

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Contempt for the Dogs / Sickness

The presenting problem in Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman is the contempt of Jesus' people for outsiders. It was not supposed to be this way. They were meant to be a conduit for God's blessing for all the nations of the earth (Genesis 12:3). Instead they have hoarded the blessing for themselves and perverted it into arrogance, entitlement, and contempt. It is shocking to see Jesus first ignore this woman, and then to hear him effectively call her a dog, but Jesus is only saying out loud what his people have come to believe in their hearts.

It is hard to make a direct connection between the daughter's

possession here and the attitudes Jesus and his disciples display, but we have learned in our own time that racial and ethnic marginalization correlate with higher rates of poverty and illness in the affected groups. So it is not unreasonable to suspect such a connection. The damage of sin is not only direct and personal. It is also insidious and pervasive!

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Misplaced Trust in Status as Children

The presenting problem proceeds from a misplaced trust. Jesus' people have come to trust not in God but in their status as special people. This is a problem of the heart, which Jesus has been addressing from the beginning of this chapter. It is another manifestation of the fact that their hearts are far from God (15:8).

Whom or what are we trusting when we marginalize others? Is it not our own status, whether racial, economic, or cultural? Is it not ourselves as normative, the standard by which others are judged? Is it not our agency, our control over our own fates?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Defiled Hearts – Opposed to God

“Anything on which your heart relies and depends,” writes Luther, “I say, that is really your God” (Large Catechism, First Commandment). A heart not set on God is a heart opposed to God and defiles us in God's eyes. In fact, it makes God our enemy.

The consequences of our idolatry are breaking out all around us in these difficult days of global pandemic and national racial reckoning. They have laid bare what used to be hidden, the literal meaning of apocalypse. Who will save us now as we cry out in desperation?

PROGNOSIS:

Heart

Surgery



Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Cleaned Hearts. God with Us

Jesus will. Jesus is the one who bears our sin onto the cross and suffers its consequences in a humiliating and painful death, just as he suffers himself to be bested in this argument with the Canaanite woman. Jesus has bigger fish to fry than mere retribution for our wrongdoing. He will do whatever it takes to save us from ourselves, whatever it costs him, trusting that his path through humiliation and death leads to life in abundance for himself and us.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Great Faith (the Trust of a Dog?)

The source of the Canaanite woman's "great faith" is a mystery to me. Why would she trust Jesus, especially when he speaks to her as he does? Had she heard of his great compassion for those in need, those without hope (e.g. Matt. 14:14)? Was she bearing the image of her Creator in her willingness to give up everything, even to be regarded as a dog, for the sake of her beloved daughter? (See Matt. 15:21-28).

Where will our faith come from as our false gods so catastrophically fail us? What could possibly turn our trust to God, our love of self to love for others. Could it be the promise of God's self-giving love for us in Jesus Christ despite our great sin and enmity with God? (Expected answer: Yes!)

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Health and Love

The result of the woman's great faith is that her daughter is instantly restored to health. It seems to me that, in her case, her great love for her daughter was a source for her great faith in Jesus. But I wonder about the disciples standing by. How did they react to Jesus extolling this foreign woman's "great faith" while continually pointing out their own "little faith" (Matt. 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20). Were their hearts at all opened to this woman they wanted to get rid of only a few minutes earlier? Did their attitudes soften at all toward their Gentile neighbors in the days and weeks that followed?

I have to believe that they got there eventually. After all, they are the ones who bore the gospel into the world after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. But what about us? We are the ones now hearing this story, which is an integral part of the fuller story of Jesus' saving love for us. Will we see the implications for our own lives, our own attitudes and allegiances? That, I think, is largely up to the Holy Spirit. But if we persist in the disciples' task of bearing the gospel

to the world, we can be sure that lives will be transformed, and maybe ours included. May it be so!