

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως  
**Proper 15-A; 20 August 2017**  
**Epiphany Seattle – Todd Foster**  
(rev. 201708171509)

**Double-edged Swords**

*In nomine...*

**I. What it is that defiles?**

*Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.*

Jesus says, What you eat isn't all that important. Whole 30 or Atkins or a Hot Dog at Safeco Field: it's all going to come out the same place. Isn't that a graphic piece of Scripture? But is Jesus really just talking about how it's OK to eat the yummy pork tenderloin at St. Cloud's?

Jesus is talking about Jewish dietary laws that are spelled out in detail in the Torah and the debates of the rabbis. But, for many people, dietary laws were not about pleasing God. Dietary laws were boundary markers. You could tell by what a person ate, and how they ate it, whether a person was an observant Jew. Eating the wrong foods, or even the right foods in the wrong way, defiled a person. To defile a person is to make that person common, not special, and of no great value. A defiled person was "other," one of "them," not one of "us." Because, of course, we are special.

Here's the problem with that. In the Kingdom of God, that way of being in the world which Jesus taught and proclaimed, your primary identity is contingent on nothing less than the very nature of God. You are God's beloved, made in God's own image, loved by God's own free choice. That is the source of your value and your worth as a person. In the Kingdom of God, there is no "other," no "them." We believe in one God, and we are all God's children. On all the earth, there is only "us."

## II. The Canaanite Woman

Now the second part of our Gospel reading today is connected to the first, but it is troubling to me. Jesus' behavior is shocking and unexpected.

Jesus wanders out into Gentile territory, the vicinity of those infamous pagan cities, Tyre and Sidon. A woman with a sick daughter comes to ask for Jesus' help. First Jesus ignores the woman's cries completely. And then, when she draws closer and refuses to be ignored, *He answer[s]*, "*It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs*" (Mt 15.26 NRSV). Jesus uses a common but degrading term to remind the Canaanite woman of *her* value in *his* society.

Isn't that a graphic piece of Scripture? This is not the Jesus I have known! If I acted this way, my mother would be horrified! I could try to spin this, try to rationalize what Jesus says and force it to make sense. But still – what he says sounds crude and racist!

AND there are two wonderful gifts in this story. We want to be careful not to lose them behind our confusion about Jesus' behavior across the double gulf of time and culture.

First of all, the Canaanite woman doesn't get hooked by the slurs cast at her by these provincial Galileans. She refuses to be defiled. She is from a different culture than Jesus, she is of a different social status than him, she even practices a different religion! But this woman knows that her primary identity, and that of her daughter, is that they are beloved of God. She is certain that her daughter is worth healing.

The second thing to notice is this: Jesus agrees with her. Emphatically. "Woman, great is your faith!" (Mt 15.28a NRSV) It's as if Jesus had gone out to Tyre and Sidon intentionally, just to show his disciples, "Now this, this is what faith looks like." And, as Jesus so clearly pointed out, she's not even Jewish!

Jesus agrees fully with the woman's point. She *is* loved by God and *worthy* of God's care. She understands exactly right! Even if Jesus' task at this particular place and time wasn't to carry his message to the Gentiles, that didn't mean that God loved this woman any less. Her value is rooted in the fact that God created her and God loves her.

### III. Today

So what does this all have to do with us today?

Like Jesus' contemporaries, we are sometimes tempted to evaluate people by our own choice of measures. This is the hallmark of groups like the white supremacists who marched in Charlottesville last weekend. Their intent is to defile others: to declare some group of people to be common, unworthy, and unlovable: "them" distinct from "us." We witness this same kind of prejudice every day right here in our own city of Seattle, if only we have the eyes to see the expressions of contempt and unwelcome that are around us. Racism is to relate to others primarily through fear, resentment, and victimhood.

In the United States, we have a long history of obsession with skin color, an obsession which has only intensified in the last century or two as our society flees from the feelings of guilt that come with confronting the realities of our historical practices of slavery and genocide. Because we ignore them, that history continues to have power in this country.

But race is only one of any number of social constructs by which we can choose to measure others. And each of those constructs is a two-edged sword. Because whatever construct I choose, I am choosing to apply it to myself as well!

So what happens if I choose the wrong construct? I might not always be young and pretty, intellectually sharp and well-spoken. What if I find myself living someplace where I'm the one with the funny accent? What if I am injured or have a stroke or make the wrong investment? Will my value as a person be lessened by these things? Will I be defiled? Will I cease being "one of us" and become "one of them?"

As inhabitants of the Kingdom of God, we are called to recognize people by their truest nature, by their primary identity as God's beloved. We make promises to respect the dignity of every human being. This means loving our neighbors the way that God loves them: in response to the image of God which they bear inside. We do it by offering the homeless a safe, warm place to sleep. We do it by cleaning and preparing apartments for families in transition. We do it by speaking warmly to those who serve us in shops, being patient, and tipping generously, as if tipping a friend, not a stranger. We do it by greeting one another. We do it by going out of our

way to be in relationship with the people most unlike ourselves, building bridges of reconciliation just as God did when God put on flesh, became a human being, and walked among us. As we do these things, we see God answering our prayer, “your kingdom come.”

For a Christian, there is no “other,” no “them:” there is only “us.” The Gospel of Jesus Christ invites us to live without prejudice, without fear and anxiety, in order to meet each person as an icon of God, to find in each neighbor a path to knowing God better. You are invited to live in the sure conviction of your status as God’s beloved and thus to have the confidence to acknowledge that status in every “other” as well.

## **Sermon Questions:**

1. How do you hear Jesus' interaction with the Canaanite woman in light of the surrounding verses?
2. What markers of value or identity do you rely upon for your own self-image?
3. What are specific ways you can facilitate the coming of the Kingdom of God in your relationships with yourself and others?