

“Blinded by Privilege” – Matthew 15:(10-20)21-28 – August 16, 2020

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This lesson from Matthew’s gospel is a strange text. It somehow seems like the two encounters don’t really fit together, but when we look at them more carefully, they actually are ironically perfect together. The latter part of the text is not very popular, because it doesn’t show Jesus in very good light. It can be a hard text to understand, but it’s actually one of my favorites, because each time I encounter it, I find a new and relevant teaching.

In the first part of the text, Jesus has been teaching the crowds some ideas that were unpopular with the Pharisees, a special group of Jews who knew the Jewish law backwards and forwards. The Pharisees were not happy because he is teaching, that, in the grand scheme of things, the Jewish purity laws aren’t that important. The purity laws were given to the Jews to keep them pure and undefiled. A quick synopsis is that these particular laws kept them set apart as a special group, the chosen ones, for the worship of and service to God. The Pharisees were upset that Jesus’ disciples had not been following the purity laws, especially hand washing before eating meals. By touching food with unclean hands, the food itself became unclean. By eating the unclean food, the disciples were defiled. Jesus quipped that Pharisees were so caught up in following the absolute letter of the law, they are missing the bigger picture of the law’s intent – mainly serving God.

Peter didn’t really understand what Jesus meant, so he asked Jesus to spell it out for him. So Jesus told the disciples that eating food with dirty hands doesn’t make you unclean – unless you’re in the middle of a worldwide pandemic – then wash your hands!! The food goes in one end and out the other into the sewer. What makes a person unclean is not what goes into the mouth, but what comes out of the mouth – the words that hurt others, the actions that are cruel and unjust. What we say and do are the things that make us clean or unclean in the eyes of God. One’s words and actions reflect the attitude of one’s heart. Basically, he’s saying, don’t worry so much about the purity laws, worry about loving your neighbor!

And here’s where it gets interesting.

Jesus and the disciples begin traveling again when a woman comes out, presumably having heard about Jesus, and she shouts to him, to come and heal her daughter, who is possessed by an unclean spirit. They recognize that she is a Canaanite woman. Clearly she is distraught and searching for anything that can save her daughter from torment. And what does Jesus do?

Well, first he simply ignores her. But she keeps shouting. The disciples beg Jesus to send her away because she is becoming a nuisance. Then Jesus says to her, “I’m only here for the Jews. Sorry.” She kneels at his feet, and appeals to his compassion, “Lord, I am asking you for help!” He rationalizes his unwillingness, “There’s not enough of me to go around. I can’t

throw the children's food out to the dogs." Yeah, Jesus said that. And she counters, "Even the dogs get the crumbs that fall from the master's table." And finally it dawns on him, the irony of this encounter.

He had just finished explaining to his disciples, that the very laws that kept them, the Jewish people, pure and clean and set apart from everyone else, were no longer needed. That it's our attitudes and actions that make us unclean. And then what does he go and do? He ignores this desperate woman's request because she is not part of the in crowd! He is so caught up in his own privilege and elitism as a Jewish male, as a part of the chosen race, that he is willing to ignore the very human needs of the rest of the world. And he doesn't even realize it. Not until she pushes back and makes him understand his own hypocrisy. And then his eyes were opened. And then he gets it. And his whole outlook on all of humankind changed.

Matthew and Mark both include this story in their gospels. They could have left it out. It is not at all flattering for Jesus. They didn't. And as a woman who has been on the receiving end of sexist discrimination, I am glad that they didn't. Even our Lord and Savior got it wrong. But it took a strong, desperate woman, who was willing to anything to have her daughter healed, including debating theology with the Jewish Messiah, to open his eyes to his own prejudice.

This my friends, is exactly why white people need to listen to the stories of people of color and learn about white privilege and systemic racism and then work to make changes. This is why straight people need to listen to the LGBTQ community. This is why Democrats and Republicans need to quit fighting and learn to really hear one another. This is why men need to learn from the experiences of women. And the why the voices of youth and seniors need to be heard. I could go on and on. We are so good at making assumptions about what we believe is normal. Or true. Or right. But our assumptions are based only upon what we currently know. And there is so much more that we don't know.

Friends, even Jesus needed to be reeducated about who was in the in group. And it was by listening to someone who he considered to be outside of that group. But he listened to her. And he changed his mind and his attitude. Here's the thing. When it comes to God's love for human beings. Every single human is in that in group. Period. We may never get it right, when it comes to how we treat others, how we love our neighbor. We will mess up, again and again. But we can learn. And we can keep trying to make it right. Let us keep trying, with God's help.