



Minister
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20th Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 14, 2005

Matthew 15:10-28

Pleading for Crumbs

Intro to reading: Our- passage this morning contains two stories; one is Jesus speaking about what defiles, and the other his encounter with a Canaanite Woman. At this point Jesus has just finished a verbal duel with Pharisees from Jerusalem and using their own words he has "one upped" them and won. It was a "letter of the law" verses "spirit of the law" kind of debate. Let us listen for God's word to us.

There is a good story that helps illuminate the difference between heaven and hell. A woman once asked God what the difference was, and God responded. In the twinkling of an eye, the woman was transported through time and space until she found herself standing before the gates of hell. It was not at all what she had expected. As she walked through the magnificent but rusted gates, she was struck with the beauty of the place. Ahead of her she saw a huge banquet room with long tables filled with food. It was the most appetizing food she had ever seen. All of the residents of hell were seated about the tables. They all looked normal except for one very important difference. All of the people

had very large arms, nearly six feet in length. At the end of each arm was a fork, but the people were unable to eat because no one had an elbow. Even though all the food was so close at hand, they were unable to put the forks into their mouths. The sounds of hell were not very pleasant, for the people cried out in agony.

Suddenly the woman was transported to heaven. Ahead of her were the same magnificent but now gleaming gates. When she walked into the celestial city she was surprised to see that things looked very much like they did in hell. Ahead of her was a banquet table, quite similar to the one she had seen moments

before. The food looked amazingly similar. As the woman walked closer to the table, she could see that people were built identically to those in hell. All had long arms with no elbows, and forks at the end. The sounds in heaven, however, were very different. People were laughing and singing, for they found their long arms to be no great disadvantage. Each person simply loaded his or her fork and then reached out across the table to the one who sat across the table. The situations were identical, except for this one thing: each other in heaven, people learned to feed each other.

Overcoming barriers that keep us from serving one another and God is an essential part of the Christian walk of faith. There are many ways in which barriers are overcome, one we see in our reading this morning is a powerful example of how well chosen words and a courageousness to speak the truth, can make all the difference in the world.

In the first of our two stories this morning Jesus is speaking to the crowds after having a debate with the Pharisees, he has now turned to them to declare that it is not what goes into a person, a reference to the purity food laws, but rather what comes out of a person, what they say and do that really matters. He takes a stand for what is right and true and it is what is in someone's heart that matters more than anything. What is in our hearts as the motivation for what we

do and say, that's what matters.

He is striving to remove barriers that the Pharisees are trying to put around the faith. They have been trying to create traditions and excessive laws governing their one and true faith. And they have the power to do it, they are the most influential of all within religious life. Pharisees call themselves the leaders of the blind. We can show people the way. And Jesus makes a joke of this saying they are the "blind leading the blind". So Jesus was just won a round of the "Maclaughlin group". He has shot them down with a quick wit and a razor sharp word. But it doesn't end here.

He has spoken the truth about what is right, and immediately afterwards he is confronted by "doing the right thing" when the woman from Cana approaches him. She is a woman of no power or stature, and she is asking for healing for her daughter. The disciples are annoyed at her very presence and wish her to go away. They believe that just because of where she is from and how she looks that she was someone they could ignore. They are setting up barriers of who should get to Jesus.

And Jesus, who has just finished saying that the differences between Jew and Gentile are not of substance, then himself seems to be hiding behind these very distinctions and using them as a barrier. According to Matthew when she first approached him, he did not answer,

he ignored her. And when she continues to follow them, he says to her, "I was only sent to the lost sheep of Israel. Ouch, That's hard to hear coming from Jesus.

She still doesn't give up and Jesus says to her, "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. And here we have the brilliant flash of wit and chutzpah, the woman says" Yes, Lord yet even the dogs eat the crumbs of the table."

Touche...

This is the turning point for Jesus. He must have smiled and known she was right. "O great is your faith." She may only have had a mustard seed sized faith, but she acted on it and knew what was right. Jesus says "Be it done as you desire", and her daughter was healed.

When this woman stood boldly and demonstrates her faith by her persistence, Jesus learns from her, and has compassion for her and lays aside his personal exhaustion and his desire to be alone. If Jesus was testing her responses, she proved herself by her unwavering commitment to stay in place and speak, she knew that it was the right thing for Jesus to heal her daughter and she had faith that he could do it.

What a radical notion: the mission of God begins with the covenant people, and only reaches completion when the whole world is brought in! In the rest of the gospel, Jesus expands his ministry and dealt compassionately with Gentiles and Samaritans. He set in motion a spirit that has proved capable of breaking down all barriers and distinctions between slave and free, rich and poor, king and peasant, Jew and Samaritan. It seems idealistic, and unworkable in the real world, that this bold, joyous, perhaps foolish spirit could be at work, but at times it does.

This past week, newscasters Peter Jennings and Lessie Stall died. In the forties and fifties the daily broadcasts of a well known radio announcer was heard all over the States and overseas, from such a wide audience there naturally came fan mail and letters. A whole host of secretaries were in place to sort each days mail and they would select one or two to pass on to him. (they tried to guess at ones that he would want to personally respond to.) one day a letter came that was not outstanding in anyway. It was a poorly written, It was written by a man who said he was a shepherd in North Dakota. scribble, with misspelled words and incorrect words and in shaky handwriting.

It was written by a man who said he lived alone in the hills, 20 miles from nearest neighbor, his only companions

were his dog, the radio and a violin. The radio was the main contact to the outside world. For years the shepherd considered him an old acquaintance. He was writing because his violin was out of tune, and he asked if someday the commentator would play an A on the piano to get his violin back in tune. Normally such a letter would have been discarded. At best a form letter may have been sent. But one day, right in the middle of a national broadcast, right in the middle of commentary on world affairs, there came a pause.

"Shepherd of North Dakota Hills are you listening?" Then a note was struck clearly and loudly on the piano. "This is your A. This is your A." If only for a moment, the ways of the world were interrupted and its conventional wisdom challenged. If only for a moment barriers came down, crumbs overflowed on the floor. Someone who was used to being overlooked was noticed and got what they needed. The right thing prevailed.

When we have the chance to say and do the right thing, may we each find the courage to say what's right, and bring down barriers that divide, and may we come to know how good and pleasant it is to live in unity. Amen.