

A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 15:10-20, 21-28

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Then he called the crowd to him and said to them,
 "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."

Then the disciples approached and said to him,
 "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense
 when they heard what you said?"
He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted
 will be uprooted."

Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind.
And if one blind person guides another,
 both will fall into a pit."

But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us."
Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding?"

Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach,
 and goes out into the sewer?
But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart,
 and this is what defiles.

For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery,
 fornication, theft, false witness, slander.
These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.
Just 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."
But he did not answer her at all.

And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps
 shouting after us."
He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."
He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food
 and throw it to the dogs."
She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs
 that fall from their masters' table."

Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith!
Let it be done for you as you wish."
And her daughter was healed instantly.

The sound track that links the first part of this story together is the contrast between what goes into the mouth and what comes out of the mouth. This motif is introduced at the end of the first episode "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." This same motif is picked up and developed in the episode after Peter asks him to explain this saying: "Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles." This is a typical verbal thread or sonic echo; in music, a theme and variation. There is development in the verbal thread each time it occurs. If you recognize the logic of this speech, it will be much easier to remember.

The story of the Canaanite woman has only one significant sonic connection around "the dogs:" "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." To which she replies, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." This is the central interaction between Jesus and the Canaanite woman. The other thing to notice is the contrast in volume. In the first episode, the woman is shouting. When she comes and kneels before him, her words are quieter and more intense.

The two stories are linked together by the common theme of uncleanness or defilement. In Israelite tradition particularly in the late Second Temple period, there were many potential sources of uncleanness. Two of the most important were eating unclean foods and contact with unclean persons. Gentiles were unclean persons because they ate unclean foods and did not follow the purity laws: washing hands, cooking utensils, sexual practices, etc. Thus, going into a Gentile's house or eating with a Gentile made a Jew unclean (Peter and Cornelius, Acts 10). Women were also often unclean because of menstrual blood. In both of these stories Jesus is dealing with explicit issues of purity or cleanliness in Jewish tradition.

This series of sayings and the healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter follows an argument Jesus has with the Pharisees, his fellow Jews, about the cleanliness laws and specifically about the dietary laws in regard to washing their hands (Mt 15.1-9). You might even want to tell this story since it is the context for these sayings. The disciples had eaten without washing their hands and the Pharisees were offended and asked Jesus why he let his disciples eat with unclean hands. He responded by calling them hypocrites for being concerned about this when they were allowing, by their traditions, such things as people not taking care of their parents but giving the money to the Temple or to religious causes. It is important to recognize that these were intra-Jewish arguments about legal matters such as current debates about ordination and inclusion of homosexual persons in every major Protestant denomination. Jesus was a liberal interpreter of the cleanliness laws of Judaism.

After this argument with the Pharisees, he calls the crowd to him and speaks to them. The context then is this argument between Jews about how important it is to observe particular parts of the law, in this case, the laws about not eating unclean foods. It is

indicative of the kind of conflicts that happen now in the church over specific elements of ethical practice and whether those are the most important things and what really matters in this. The point Jesus is making here is that it doesn't really matter as much about what one eats or how one eats it because that doesn't focus on what really matters. Rather, the weightier parts of the law are the things that are generated from within people that result in things that are truly destructive to other people.

What defiles a person is that which makes one unclean. This was a major issue in Jesus' time – that is clean and unclean foods and clean and unclean hands. Jesus' reaction against the long-standing Jewish legal tradition is the reason for this major division between rabbinic Judaism and Christianity now. The Christian tradition now focuses legal issue of purity on sexual practices rather than on dietary and culinary practices. What Jesus focuses on in his reinterpretation of these legal rulings is what comes out of the heart. What he calls for is discernment and for paying attention to what is in your heart rather than paying attention to what you eat and how you eat it. And he names those sources of uncleanness specifically: “evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.” In effect, Jesus advocates attention to the weightier matters of the law. These legal issues are more important than what foods one eats.

A major dimension of the cleanliness laws was separation of Jews from Gentiles. A central emphasis of the tradition was separating yourself from those things that are unclean. And Jesus shifts the focus of the law to what comes out of your heart. In the story of his trip to Tyre and Sidon, Jesus acts on his teaching. The connection between these two stories implies that Jesus is fed up with the argument and just leaves and goes to Gentile territory. The Pharisees and scribes had come to Galilee from Jerusalem to pick this fight with him (Mt. 15.1). After his discussion with them, he left Galilee and the land of Israel and went to the neighboring country of Phoenicia specifically to the district of Tyre and Sidon, Gentile territory. The Canaanite woman who came to him was, from the point of view of religious Jews of Jesus' day, unclean. If he had anything to do with her, he made himself unclean.

Jesus' responses to the woman are initially the responses of a Jew who is following the purity laws. He does not respond to her at all when she yells at him and asks him to have mercy on her. His disciples support him in his refusal to talk with her and encourage him to send her away because of her shouting. Jesus' second response is to explain to her and to his disciples that his mission is only for Jews: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” When she kneels before him and begs him to help her, his third response to her is once again the response of a Jew who is aware of the long history of Gentile oppression of Jews that included the murder of thousands of Jewish children. This long history is emphasized in the story by the naming of the woman as a Canaanite woman rather than as a Syro-Phoenician as in Mark. Jesus' words—“It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs”—that is, to take the gifts of God to the house of Israel and give it to the Canaanites, who here are being characterized as dogs.

The norm of judgment that operates in this story is thoroughly Jewish. It is probable that Matthew's audience was predominantly Jews who shared or at least understood the hostility toward Gentiles that was the result of centuries of Gentile oppression and hostility toward Jews. Since the Babylonian conquest of Israel in 587 BCE, Israel was an independent Jewish state for only about one hundred years from the Maccabean revolt until the establishment of Roman rule (167-63 BCE). Read, for example, the stories of the Maccabean martyrs in I and II Maccabees, particularly the mother and seven sons who were executed one day by Antiochus IV Epiphanies, a Syrian king (II Maccabees 7) if you want to get some sense of the basis of Jewish hatred of Gentiles. Jesus was also a Jew who shared his people's experience. Jesus' initial responses to the woman of refusing to answer her and identifying his mission as being exclusively for the children of Israel was a source of credibility for Jesus as a Jewish leader with the Jews in Matthew's audience. Jesus' initial responses were neither shocking nor offensive. They were credible and fully appropriate for Matthew's audiences.

This is the context for Jesus' sudden reversal of policy and attitude. The tone of the woman's response is hard to identify. She accepts and incorporates his characterization of her and her people as dogs and she offers to accept crumbs of goodness from him. In this context, it is possible that she is defiant and forcibly asserts the legitimacy of her request: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." At the other pole of verbal attitude is the possibility is that she is humble and continues her plea on her knees before him. We are more inclined to hear her as defiant or at least assertive. The tone of humility is more difficult for contemporary audiences to accept. I have often told this with a tone of humble access as a combination confession and plea. I have more recently told it with a more assertive tone. This is more in continuity with her initial shouting and is more believable. It is also in greater continuity with the stories of the widow of Zarephath and the Shunammite woman whose sons were brought back to life by Elijah (I Kings 17.8-24) and Elisha (II Kings 4.8-37). In both of these stories the women are both assertive and profoundly grateful. After Elisha restores her son to life, the Shunammite woman falls at his feet and bows to the ground in gratitude. There is some combination of assertiveness and humility that is appropriate in this Jesus story. But on balance, I find the assertive interpretation of her response more historically probable. I would suggest that you try both options and make your own decision.

Regardless of the woman's attitude in her statement, Jesus' response is a radical step of reconciliation with the Gentile enemies of Israel. It is as radical as it would be for an Israelite now to recognize and do good things for a Palestinian or visa versa in the context of what is happening in Israel now. Jesus' action breaks the normal expectations of what Jews do in relation to their enemies. He extends the benefits of the kingdom of God to his enemy. Jesus recognizes and names the woman's great faith as the proximate cause of his response. However, Jesus is acting out his own teaching earlier in the Gospel by loving his enemy (Mt 5.43-48). He is also extending his redefinition of the law by paying attention to what is in this woman's heart and breaking down the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles. He breaks the law and responds to her with compassion. The

predominately Jewish context of Matthew is reflected in that he first responds to the woman as a Jew and honors the separation from Gentiles. But the Jewish context is also reflected in his prophetic response that is in continuity with the stories of Elijah and Elisha. Jesus has compassion for her and heals her daughter. This story may also be an experience of Jesus changing his mind. If so, there may have been a significant pause between the woman's statement about the dogs eating the children's crumbs and Jesus' final blessing. It is a major turning point in the gospel narrative and in the relationship between Jews and Gentiles.