

Meditation
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I'm going to split the reading of this week's lectionary in two, sometimes it's hard to remember what was said early on it is too long, or disjointed, which this might be, unless you've had a week to study and compare it. So firstly, in Matthew 15:10-20, ¹⁰ Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen and understand. ¹¹ What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them."

¹² Then the disciples came to him and asked, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?"

¹³ He replied, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. ¹⁴ Leave them; they are blind guides.^[a] If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit."

¹⁵ Peter said, "Explain the parable to us."

¹⁶ "Are you still so dull?" Jesus asked them. ¹⁷ "Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? ¹⁸ But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. ²⁰ These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them."

Firstly, the gist of the first part of today's text is saying, those laws about what we eat and drink is not what God deems as clean or unclean. It's what comes out of our mouths. The matter of the world, the food stuffs, the mixing of meat and dairy, the cloven-hoofed animals, this doesn't defile a person. This is why the disciples say to Jesus that the Pharisees are upset with him. There are rules to follow in this world. Matthew's audience is comprised of a mainly Jewish population who adhere to strict Halakhic law. And Jesus showing up on the scene has the habit of disrupting the accepted norm. This isn't just tradition we are following here, it's the law.

Earlier in Matthew's gospel, Jesus is attributed as saying:

¹⁷ "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:17-20)

I'm hearing some contradiction here. Between following the law and doing away with it. There is a law that needs to be accomplished in this world, and there are laws we do best to ignore for righteousness sake.

No wonder the Pharisees took issue with Jesus. At this point even I'm confused. I can imagine what you're all thinking.

In this opening text is just a small example of what the law says versus what Jesus claims. There seem to be countless laws and interpretations of laws and commandments in the Hebrew bible, that Jesus and his compatriots would have studied endlessly. The food laws are only a small portion of these.

This summer, many of you will know I was away doing a 6-week intensive session in Halifax. One of the courses I was intently studying for was called Rabbinic Judaism and the New Testament. In this course we looked at Haggadic texts, which are narrative texts that centered around visions and stories, and Halakhic texts which centered around Torah Law, and we looked at how the Rabbis would discuss and debate and interpret these texts. So, I was excited to see this come up, probably way more excited than you are, but I need to show you how I put my studies to use somewhat right?

The main lesson I came away with in studying Jewish Torah law and the Rabbinic interpretation of it, and Jesus' fulfilment of that law is simple, yet poignant, and exciting. The law was given to live by, not to die by. You can look up ancient and contemporary Rabbinic works, and see this statement over and over.

Simple right? But what does that mean, each time we read the parables, the stories, the laws, the conflicts, the life lessons.

So, this first part of this text really just sets us up for the second. The encounter with the Canaanite woman. And here things seem to get a little dicey too. Let's hear part two of this week's lectionary.

Matthew 15:21-28

The Faith of a Canaanite Woman

²¹ Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. ²² A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly."

²³ Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."

²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

²⁵ The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.

²⁶ He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

²⁷ "Yes it is, Lord," she said. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

²⁸ Then Jesus said to her, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed at that moment.

This has never been an easy passage to read or decipher, let alone preach on. These pieces we've heard could easily be read and interpreted separately. But they fall together this Sunday and so we try to make sense of why.

The reaction we get from Jesus isn't what we might have come to expect, with our knowledge and understanding of who Jesus is and what he stands for. Jesus is abrupt, dismissive, not very compassionate. Downright cruel if you ask me. Jesus seemingly ignores her, then dismisses her saying he only comes for the lost children of Israel, and obviously, this Canaanite woman is not. He humiliates her and calls her a dog. I wonder how this all really played out. How long were the pauses in this altercation, what was the tone of voice, honestly, was Jesus giving his fellow disciples the side eye through it all. I wish I could attribute this thought properly, but I read a colleague's question online asking, did Jesus not react right off the bat so he sees how his disciples would respond?

But she is persistent isn't she, this Canaanite woman. Much like the parable of the persistent widow. Because she knows who Jesus is. She knows this Son of David, the lineage, the tradition, the prophecy, she knows a God of mercy. She knows the law that God intends us to live by, not to die by, because "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." Because all worthy of God's mercy and loving kindness. How Jesus reacts checks out for the audience of Matthew and the disciples. "Send her away..." they say. She is an outsider, an enemy of Israel, she is unclean and a sinner. Do we know for sure that these two events, the discussion of the law, and the interaction with the Canaanite woman, happened one after the other? We can't know this for sure, but the writer of Matthew's Gospel leads us to believe it so, prompting this discussion about how we might use tradition and law, in our own context. The Rabbis debates have been consistent in telling us that tradition and law are for us to live by, not die by. And not to let the blind lead the blind into falling into a pit of legality and religiosity that will pull us further and further from God's intention for God's people.

So, as we go away from this text, it is a reminder that like the hymn we sang at the beginning, we are connected in a deeper way. There is a commonality we seek in relationship to each other and to God that surpasses and overrides human law, and relies on this divine law that we are called to live by, not die by. So, I wonder if I've now given us enough food for thought to take these lessons and decipher for ourselves how they apply in our world today, in our lives today. What do we choose to live by, what will we choose to die by. And does this align with what we know of God and God's intention for the world, for God's people and God's church. This is not a simple task, even if the objective of the lesson is. And so all I can say is, thanks be to God for God's loving mercy to impart God's grace on us as we try and figure this all out for ourselves, just as the disciples had to do, perhaps with Jesus sitting next to them, and us, giving us a little side eye, wondering what was might say or how we might react when faced with hard questions.

May you be blessed with God's Wisdom in your constant discernment.