

**Pentecost 11A, Proper 15. Matt. 15:10-28; Is. 56:1, 6-8;  
Rom. 11:1-2a, 29-32. August 16, 2020.**

Wise priests take care to be on vacation for the Sunday that features this gospel, in which Jesus argues against handwashing and is seemingly cruel to a woman because of her ethnicity. If we are unwise enough to schedule ourselves to preach today, we naturally look for some advice. That advice comes in two principal schools. The first school says, don't you dare suggest that Jesus, even in his humanity, is less than perfect or is subject to the human systems of sinfulness such as sexism and ethnocentrism that afflict us. The second school says, don't you dare minimize the offense Jesus commits in this passage by coming up with an explanation that gets him off the hook for what the Bible says he did.

I understand both schools. It is indeed bizarre to make this story more important than everything else we know about Jesus. Every other story tells us that while he can be irritable and sometimes is harsh, he never punches down, nor does he, as a rule, need us to teach him about how great God's love is. And the other school is correct that in our culture, we are always ready to explain away the ways that men hurt women. He didn't mean it, he's not that kind of guy, what's the big deal, what must she have done to deserve it? He shouldn't be punished for one mistake, and then we don't notice the harm that "mistake" has caused to the woman. The way this story says Jesus treated this woman of another race is unacceptable, and we don't have room in our understanding of Jesus to believe that he would do this. A preaching professor who is a Black woman said this week, "I have a hard time recognizing as lord someone who doesn't recognize me as being created in the image of God."

The popular ways to fix this passage are to say that Jesus didn't mean it, but was proving a point to the disciples by airing *their* prejudices and then letting the woman's relentless faith show how absurd those prejudices are. But if that fix is going to avoid unnecessary cruelty, we have to imagine a very eloquent nudge nudge wink wink to the woman in advance, which the story doesn't appear to support. Or, to make the woman the hero of the passage whose courage and faithfulness teach Jesus something about the expansiveness of God's grace. And then we have a savior who can learn, which might be pretty good, but also one who needs to learn some pretty important fundamentals, which is less good.

I have my own theory, which is that this story isn't about Jesus at all. I might be wrong, but I think this whole passage is a dramatization of some of the most important arguments in the earliest church. In the decades after Easter, the gospel spread like wildfire among Gentiles, non-Jews, who became Christian without also becoming Jewish. Much of the rest of the New Testament, after the gospels, is trying to deal with the problems this caused, as Gentile Christians began to outnumber Christians who were also faithful Jews. The point of greatest tension in the newly created common life of these disparate folks was not circumcision, but table fellowship—eating together. If you cannot eat together, you are not one people; if you cannot break bread together, you certainly cannot share the holy meal of the Eucharist. And the table manners of the Gentiles differed so much from those of the Jewish Christians that it was deeply unclear whether

a faithful Jew could share a meal with a Gentile who would not observe dietary laws and customs.

The first part of our reading, clear as day, is about that. The Pharisees criticize the disciples for not keeping the custom of washing their hands before they eat. Jesus responds by going deeper into the heart of the Law—cleanliness or defilement is judged by social actions that come from the heart, not ceremonial actions designed to purify or guard the heart. This shift in what matters is an answer to the question of how Christians from different backgrounds can eat together. The dietary customs and rituals matter less than social actions, and Jewish and Gentile Christians united in works of love can eat together without barriers.

Now I could be wrong, but I think that this encounter with a Gentile woman that immediately follows makes most sense as a dramatization of exactly the argument Jesus had just settled. I think it makes most sense as a parable the early church is telling itself. This woman, identified as a Canaanite—the ancient enemy of Israel—is not defiled by where she comes from. She is made clean by the extraordinary persistence of the faith she expresses. The trouble Jesus is shown to have getting to that realization is the trouble the earliest church had figuring out how to embody the radical universality of God’s mercy and love.

I’m afraid that it’s a trouble we still have. We might enthusiastically embrace the teaching that God’s love and mercy cannot be contained, and therefore is poured out even on us. We might even embrace that it is available, too, to folks we’re pretty sure are less deserving than we are. But then when we try to live in a way that embodies this belief, across cultural or racial divides, it is going to be messy. Trying to live like God’s love and mercy really are universal, to people like us and people unlike us, is always going to be messy, and the mess doesn’t necessarily mean that we are doing everything wrong. We will find, just as the early church did, that some things that we have been taught to think are essential are pretty contingent, and that some things we never noticed before or only noticed casually are much more important than we realized. And these negotiations can hurt.

But we have to engage in them, because as Isaiah tells us, God will gather others we do not know to God’s holy mountain. And as Paul says in Romans, God’s mercy has always been intended for all. And so we try to live like we believe this, that God’s love and mercy really are for all. And doing that we try to identify and dismantle the barriers that keep us from breaking bread together, from sharing a common life. When we’re brave enough to do this, there will often be a mess. Sometimes someone will get hurt. But making a mess, for us, isn’t a reason to quit. It is God’s radical mercy that calls us into this work, and mercy is only needed by those of us who are not perfect. So in God’s mercy we try to maintain justice and do what is right, we try to greet the strangers in God’s house of prayer in a language we may not know, we mess up, we ask for forgiveness, and we keep going deeper and deeper into the mercy and love of God. And soon, God’s salvation will come. Amen.