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Introduction

Questions in preparation to read the text

Think of the usefulness of boundaries? ('Good fences make good neighbours')
What boundaries are unhelpful?

How comfortable are you at crossing boundaries?
What boundaries have you crossed and found a surprise?

Text

Matthew 15:10–28

Things That Defile

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 offence 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.'

The Canaanite Woman's Faith

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.

Comment

Challenging Boundaries. Between Good and Evil, Clean and Unclean, between Insiders and Outsiders

In the preceding chapter, Jesus performs three acts that reveal his power and authority: the feeding of the five thousand (14:13–21); walking on the water (14:22–33); and the healings at Gennesaret (14:34–36). Now, in Chapter 15, Matthew tells us about the response of the Pharisees and Scribes. The Pharisees had built up a body of tradition designed to ensure the observance of the written law. They also wished to extend to all Israelites the rules that originally applied only to members of priestly families (Lev 22:1–16) on the grounds that Israel is a priestly people. They expected Jesus and his followers to observe the rules of priestly purity, so they challenge Jesus about his disciples failing to wash their hands before they eat. (15:2). Jesus argues that in practice the Pharisees' traditions can undermine the written law they were supposedly supporting, for instance the commandment of obligation to honour your parents was waived if a person placed a property under sacred vow as a means of preventing parents from having access to it.

Jesus quotes Isaiah (v8f)

"This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines"

What follows (our reading for today) carries on this theme in a very radical way, as Jesus contrasts ritual purity as practiced by the Pharisees and purity of heart.

The Old Testament refers frequently to how touching or eating certain foods made a person ritually unclean, unfit to worship God. In saying that 'it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles', Jesus is being highly controversial. He is implying that wrong attitudes and motivations are a more fundamental problem than unclean food, yet the Scriptures emphasize, again and again the importance of abstaining from certain food. The disciples clearly are somewhat shocked too, and tell Jesus how the Pharisees are offended by what he had said. Jesus replies by describing the Pharisees in the harshest possible terms as being rootless, blind and dangerous.

It is possible to be obsessed with ritual purity, motivated by self-centred concern and lack loving concern for the well-being of others. A lack of love can contaminate relationships and poison other peoples' lives. We are defiled by our words and actions that kill, abuse, belittle and demean others. Good is being defined in relational terms, not in what is propositionally correct or ritualistically proscribed. As ever, life is to be judged in the quality of our relationships.

Jesus and his disciples move to Tyre and Sidon, where a non-Jewish woman demands Jesus' attention, addressing him with Jewish titles, Lord, Son of David. Her daughter is seriously ill. Jesus ignores her. That's surprising. Why? The disciples want Jesus to 'send her away' but you can almost see Jesus thinking it out, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel'.

But Jesus didn't send her away. She kneels as a subject would to a King and pleads on behalf of her sick daughter, 'Lord help me'.

Jesus responds that she is beyond the scope of his ministry – she does not belong to the 'house of Israel'. They are his priority as in a family children are more important than pets.

Then that wonderful reply, "Yes, Lord yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table"

And a crumb is enough. Her faith is great. The disciples are amazed, if not offended. It is discovered that this non-Jewish 'outsider' is already an exemplary 'insider'.

Response

We like people who are like us. The purity laws were central to the lives of Pharisees. Jesus represented a contradiction to all they held as important. How would we respond to someone who challenged us that deeply? With anger? Dismissal? How willing are we to learn from those who are different?

Meet a person with whom you would not normally associate, perhaps a beggar on the street, or a person in your own congregation whom you would rather avoid. Have a conversation. Reflect on that experience. Has your 'view' of that person changed?

Think of a conflict and of how you regarded the other party at that time? Are you willing to take the imaginative leap into their world as this Canaanite woman entered the world of Jesus and his disciples?

Prayer

Boundary breaking God,
You crossed unimaginable space to dwell among us.
Your love erased the limits of human love.
As we are held in your unconditional acceptance
May we be courageous and scandalously generous
in our love for others
And so, however imperfectly, mirror your gift to us. Amen.