

“Woman, Great Is Your Faith”  
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,  
concerning Matthew 15:10-28  
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At the start of our story, the disciples seem rather worried that Jesus has offended the Pharisees. While the Pharisees have become more of a caricature to us than a group of real and devout people, in their day, Pharisees were kind of a big deal. When it came to religion, they were the experts, the faithful, the model of devotion. They were the guys who knew stuff, and it probably wasn't good to offend them.

As if to avert a pending disaster, the disciples rush up to Jesus while he's in the middle of talking to the crowd and whisper in concern, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?” Jesus replies, “Meh.” More specifically he says, “Don't worry about them. They are the blind leading the blind. They'll all fall into a pit eventually.”

Jesus' interaction with the Pharisees is one of those Bible stories that shocks us into remembering: Jesus wasn't that nice. He was good. He was caring. He was the Son of God. He was pure love. But he wasn't nice. He said it like it was and he didn't seem to care if the truth stung. No sugar-coating, no mincing of words, no exchange of obligatory pleasantries. He delivered his truth raw. He was a guy, who, frankly, wouldn't get along too well in the South.

In fact, the whole reason this open conflict with the Pharisees started was because Jesus' disciples didn't wash their hands before dinner, and Jesus defended them. Chapter 15, verse 1: “Then the Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.” Never mind that the Pharisees came all the way from Jerusalem just to register that complaint. My point is, any decent Southerner would think twice before inviting Jesus and his disciples to a dinner party after a debacle like that.

But Jesus, ever the teacher, uses this moment to deliver a stinging set of truths. He's not as worried about his disciples behaving like unsanitary boys as he is about the pretentious purity of the Pharisees. Of course it is gross to eat without washing your hands, but to Jesus it is a whole new level of gross to act religious without a clean heart.

“Hypocrites!” he calls them. “For the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God.” And then he quotes from the prophet Isaiah, “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. In vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.” Ouch. You can see why the Pharisees might be feeling a wee bit offended.

Although, I'm not entirely sure the disciples are as worried about the Pharisees as they seem. It's possible that the real reason they want Jesus to shut up is so that he'll quit drawing attention to the fact that they didn't wash their hands. They might be thinking, couldn't you have picked a nobler moment to use us as an example?

The rest of the disciples might be ready for Jesus to move on, but as usual, Peter can't keep his mouth shut. "Explain this parable to us," he says, as if there were something especially cryptic about the blind leading the blind.

In what I can only imagine to be a spirit of exasperation, Jesus offers one of the finest explanations recorded in Scripture. Ever passionate that his own disciples not remain blind, Jesus gives them this visual: "Do you not see? Whatever you eat becomes poop in the end. It's just not important." (That was a paraphrase on my part, but it's pretty close to what he actually said.) Jesus continues to explain, "It's not what goes into you that defiles. It's what comes out: evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile." You are not contaminated by what you eat. You are contaminated by whom you harm.

I pause here to acknowledge that Jesus' understanding of contamination might not hold up too well under the scrutiny of science, and as your pastor I strongly urge you to keep washing your hands, no matter what Jesus tells you. Jesus' definition of *spiritual* contamination, though, is important. He says it's not the breaking of customs or traditions that will defile you. Purity is about your human relationships and how you treat people.

As compelling as a contentious debate about hand washing is, the most fascinating bit of this whole thing is what happens next. The conversation ends and Jesus and his disciples go on their way when along comes this woman and she is SHOUTING—not asking politely, not gently pleading—she is SHOUTING (like any desperate mama would) and Jesus ignores her. Her child is in torment and Jesus doesn't answer. This isn't just: not nice. This is flat out mean.

The text doesn't say why he doesn't answer her. Maybe he is exhausted. Maybe he is grumpy and annoyed. Maybe he is lost in thought and tuning out the sounds of the world around him. Maybe he is hoping a disciple would handle it. We don't know. What we do know is the disciples have had enough. Enough of listening to her SHOUT.

Have you ever gotten tired of the shouting? Had to turn off the tv or computer or tune out the news? Because ugh. So. Much. SHOUTING.

If so, you can empathize with the disciples who urge Jesus, "Send her away, for she keeps SHOUTING at us." And Jesus answers them, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," which sounds like a fancy way to say, "Yeah, I'm not helping her." But the woman is not deterred.

**THE WOMAN IS NOT DETERRED.**

"Lord, help *me*," she says, I think with an emphasis on the *me*. Because she knows she's not from the house of Israel, but she's desperate for Jesus to notice her anyway. "Help ME. You may not know me or recognize me, but my daughter is in trouble, in danger. MY DAUGHTER. Help me."

To which our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ coolly replies, “It’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” *Jesus* calls this woman, this Canaanite, this non-Israelite woman a dog. It’s not the sort of story you could write a VBS curriculum about.

Biblical scholars have long debated this passage trying to puzzle out the Son of God’s use of such a degrading slur. Was he joking? (Not funny.) Was he testing her, and if so, what kind of sick test was that? Is he teaching his disciples a lesson, maybe . . . and exploiting this woman’s vulnerability and sick child to do it? Maybe “dog” wasn’t really that bad of a thing to call someone back then? (Spoiler alert: it was bad back then too.)

Some scholars suggest that here we have an example of Jesus’ humanity, including his own prejudice bred into him by his culture and his environment. Even Jesus was tainted by the sort of bigotry rampant in the system.

It makes me uncomfortable to think my sweet Jesus could have anything he needed to unlearn, and it messes a bit with my theology of the sinless Christ. On the other hand, I do find it comforting to imagine that, like us, Jesus also had to do the hard work of dismantling his unconscious prejudices. If *Jesus* had to do it, surely you and I are not exempt.

I don’t think we can know for sure what Jesus was thinking when he responded to that Canaanite woman—first by ignoring her and then by calling her a dog. But I notice one huge glaring difference between Jesus and the Pharisees from earlier in the story. When they were called out on their baloney, the Pharisees *took offense*. Naturally they felt defensive. Unfortunately, it is often the feeling defensive that keeps you blind.

When the Canaanite woman argues with Jesus, saying, “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table,” Jesus does not defend himself. He doesn’t say, “Lady, don’t accuse me of not feeding the hungry! Look at my record. I just fed the five thousand.” He does not say, “Whoa now, I’m not prejudiced. I have Canaanite friends.” He does not say to her, “I’m JESUS, the Christ. I know things. Don’t correct me.” He doesn’t launch into a lofty critique of why her response is not sufficient. He does not accuse her of misunderstanding him. He does not tell her to calm down.

Instead Jesus looks her and her challenge straight in the eye and says, “Woman, great is your faith.”

Why was her faith so great? She believed *more than Jesus did* that God’s mercy belonged to her. She believed more than Jesus did that she deserved to be heard. She believed God should listen to her suffering, and she believed it so hard she wouldn’t shut up. She believed it so hard she SHOUTED, and she believed it so hard she annoyed the disciples. She believed it so hard she wouldn’t give up. She believed it so hard she challenged Jesus. She believed it so hard she persisted. She was what you call a Believer.

We could spend time debating whether Jesus made a big mistake in the way he answered her the first time, but I am confident Jesus wouldn’t care what we decided about him. He’s just not that worried about appearances. I think he’d tell us—stop talking about me, about you—look at her

faith! Listen! Look! This will heal you of blindness. I know so, because even my eyes were opened by her extraordinary faith.”

Beloved, it seems to me we are inevitably going to make mistakes as we try to unpack our prejudices and shed ourselves of their poisonous hold on our thinking and our behaving. But if we follow the example of Jesus, we will keep our eyes open. We won't pour energy into defending ourselves, because it's not about how we look to others; it's about what we see. And so we will look to the untiring faith of those who believe they are just as worthy of God's mercy as we are, and we will listen close and we will unlearn our certainty about the way the world works. We will wash our hands of all pretense and join the feast where all God's children gather round as equals and as friends. Amen.