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~ Matthew 15:10-28 ~

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The holy gospel according to Matthew. **Glory to you, O Lord.**

¹⁰ [Jesus] called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand:¹¹ it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” ¹² Then the disciples approached and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?” ¹³ He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.” ¹⁵ But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.” ¹⁶ Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷ Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰ 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. ²² 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.” ²³ 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.” ²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” ²⁶ He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” ²⁷ She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed from that moment.

The gospel of the Lord. **Praise to you, O Christ.**

This is a dialogical sermon between Rafael Rodriguez, Director of Public Policy, Eastern Synod, ELCIC, and Katherine Gohm, Assistant to the Bishop, Eastern Synod, ELCIC. Katherine and Rafael are mother and son.

Rafael Rodriguez writes,

Chapter 15 of the gospel of Matthew opens with a pivotal question from the Pharisees to Jesus: “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.” It is important to contextualize this in the fuller context of the gospel. Jesus has performed miracles: feeding the five thousand, walking on water, and healing the sick. Yet the Pharisees question his authority and his faith on the basis of allowing his disciples to eat without cleaning their hands first. We can see in the verses immediately preceding our reading today that this breeds a harsh rebuke from Jesus, with him stating:

⁷ You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said:

⁸ ‘This people honors me with their lips,

but their hearts are far from me;

⁹ in vain do they worship me,

teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

We can feel Jesus’ frustration building here, a frustration that seems to carry through all the way to verse 26 of our gospel reading. Jesus goes on to emphasize his point against the Pharisees by saying “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.” This statement seems clear enough, yet upon conversation with his disciples the response he receives from Peter is one of confusion. “Explain this parable to us.” It hardly even seems a parable, more so a truism. Here again we see the frustration of Jesus. “Are you also still without understanding?” It’s almost as though Jesus is asking “what are you not getting here?”

This past Wednesday, August 12th, marked International Youth Day. It is in this context that something dawned on me. It had never occurred to me before in all my thinking of and interpretation of Jesus: he’s really quite young here. If this historical record of Jesus is accurate, he would have been somewhere between his mid-twenties to early thirties at the time of this scene. That puts Jesus in a context where I can reimagine and relate to his words far more deeply than if I hold them up as solely the divine teachings of an older man. In many ways I empathize deeply with this young, frustrated Jesus. I can’t count the amount of times I’ve been speaking or even arguing with older peers, teachers, my own mother, and having the thought of “what’s not clicking for you here? Are you also still without understanding?”

More broadly, I think I can speak with a relative amount of certainty that this is largely the feeling of youth worldwide. We have grown up in an incredibly turbulent time. Large-scale, long lasting wars have become entrenched and normalized again, the climate aches and groans under the weight of centuries of industrialism and exploitation, economic opportunity seems to escape us at every turn as youth unemployment grows steadily across the globe. Children, young workers, and students have been banging at the doors of power for decades now. Whether it be the Youth Climate Movement founded over two decades ago, the student encampments that popped up on university campuses in opposition to the ongoing genocide in Gaza, or the millions of Indian youth who have banded under the banner of the *Cockroach Janata Party*, taking on the insult of the word. We have been screaming “Are you also still without understanding? Don’t you see what’s flowing from your heart and how it is defiling the world in its entirety?” I think a young, frustrated Jesus would feel right at home in any of these spaces.

For far too long, these cries have fallen on hardened hearts. What has come from the hearts of our older, adult, leaders? What has come from following the traditions of the past? What we are witnessing now is increased funding for weapons of war and destruction, billions in government subsidies for oil and gas pipelines, the gutting of social systems in favour of corporate welfare and greed.

If what comes from the heart is what defiles, as Jesus teaches, it must also be true that what comes from the heart can breathe God’s justice into the world. We may live to see this, when we can open our own hearts to the youth. In the words of Indian author Arundhati Roy, writing in regards to the aforementioned *Cockroach Janata Party* and their solidarity protests against corruption in their country: “The young have given us a gift. It is up to us all, every one of us to make what they have done matter.”

Katherine Gohm writes,

And so this religious debate between Jesus and the Pharisees on what defiles is an interfamilial argument; differing viewpoints on what defiles. It’s a debate, however, that cannot stay there. Religious faith and understanding is to be lived out, in the world, through daily encounters. The scene shifts in Matthew’s gospel today, but the topic stays the same. The meeting between Jesus and his disciples with the Canaanite woman in the area of Tyre and Sidon is where, pardon my use of fossil fuel product imagery, the rubber hits the road. A mother’s desperate plea to find healing for her child is where Jesus’ own teaching about defilement, about what comes from the heart, must be lived out.

As preacher Barbara Brown Taylor writes in a sermon on this same text, all the talk about clean and unclean, about what defiles, is really talk about barriers and lines drawn. The gospel hands them to us: it is a woman who approaches Jesus, a Canaanite, a common ancestor “othered” through occupation and force, a pagan worshiper of Baal and other gods, an outsider, separated through ethnicity and religious practice.

We hear her desperate plea: “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David.” What she receives is silence. Yet her anguished words keep ringing out - so much so that the disciples are irritated by her and want her sent away. But she keeps shouting into that barren space, out of love for her child. This mother, this Canaanite woman, is the conclusion of Jesus’ debate with the Pharisees.

In this scene shift are we getting the same frustrated Jesus? Because only when Jesus’ disciples say something to him does he respond - not to the woman’s desperation - but rather to lecture her on his mission: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Her sad plight does not seem to be enough to move him. Recognizing who he is, this insistent mother kneels before him, praying, pleading. Then, we hear some of the harshest words that leave Jesus’ mouth: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Not only does he not respond to her desperate appeal, he insults her while remaining untouched by her circumstance. Children, that is the Israelites, are to get the food, to be included in the community of God. Dogs, this woman and her kind, are not meant to be fed and are excluded from the community of God.

It’s hard to understand this Jesus. I would prefer this encounter between Jesus and the woman to be a literary device by Matthew; tension which drives the narrative forward. That way, Jesus’ reputation, in my eyes, would remain intact: that is, his response to people was always compassionate and inclusive, as I’ve both preached and proclaimed.

But what if Jesus *is* frustrated? What if we consider that a very human Jesus also struggles with who is in and who is out, with barriers erected and drawn lines?

The Canaanite woman keeps pushing. She takes on the insult (much like the students in the Cockroach Janta Party) and says, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” More than a smart comeback, she is saying, “I know who you are and I believe in what you can do.”

Jesus hears. He hears her faith. With her unrelenting urging, Matthew tells us that Jesus steps beyond the traditions of his religious understanding and moves across seemingly barren spaces to encounter her and her need.

With this year's International Youth Day theme, *Different Contexts, Common Aspirations*, I cannot help but think about the youth and young people in our church and across the globe. Are we listening to their pleas? Do we understand what it means for them to be young today? Do we trust our younger selves and remember what we dreamed of and hoped for? Do our encounters across generations open our hearts to what they dream and hope for? Or are we too caught up in lines drawn, barriers erected, to invite young people fully into our shared life together? To incorporate their experiences, wisdom, and understanding into our common life - both in and outside of the church. Perhaps the rubber of our faith hasn't always hit the road of the gospel. Perhaps we have not let ourselves be shaped by the encounter.

Pastor Nancy Kelly wrote a book entitled *Here be Wonders: The Gospel's Pulse in Unsettled Times*.¹ To paraphrase part of her story called "The Laneway" she writes about a shared laneway that existed behind St. Mark's Lutheran Church and the neighbouring high school, Kitchener Collegiate Institute, or KCI. A shared laneway that mapped out encounter between the people who found themselves there: "congregation members, students, hospital visitors and community groups like AA."

In the story, Kelly writes about a student, angry because the taxi she was in was taking up space in the laneway. The student shouted insults at her and the taxi driver, then flicked a cigarette butt at them. Someone must have witnessed the interaction. A few days later a letter arrived at the church written by the KCI Student Council addressed to Pastor Nancy and St. Mark's. They had written an apology on behalf of the school and the student body, saying how much they appreciated the relationship they had with the church. Their apology was accepted. Kelly writes that the church "thanked the high school for teaching the church something about forgiveness and mending damaged bridges." She writes further, "Contested and congested spaces, rough spots in hearts, in communities and in the world are places for bridges, built, broken and mended."

This is the gift of healing wherever and whenever hearts are opened to listen and understand. Amen.

¹ Here Be Wonders: The Gospel's Pulse in Unsettled Times, Nancy Vernon Kelly, Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, Oregon, 2024.