

***Sermon - Year A - Matthew 15: 10-28 (08/16/20)***

(The Rev. Deacon Geri Nelson)

Over and over and over again, Jesus showed his disciples who he was. Last week Jesus calmed the storms which threatened to swamp his disciples on the lake; the week before he fed thousands with just a few bits of fish and bread. This week we read two teachings from Jesus in Matthew's Gospel: one having to do with Jesus telling us about the importance of what we say and do that comes from inside us. And in the other lesson we "watch" as the story develops before us. The story unfolds quickly and unexpectedly as a woman crosses into the path of Jesus in the form of a desperate and persistent gentile.

In the first teaching Jesus tells his disciples about what really matters in this life. He tells them "It is what comes out of the mouth that defiles - evil intentions, malice, murder, slander, false witness, adultery. These are what defile because they come from the heart." Jesus was telling them, It's not what we eat that should bother us about our souls, it's what we say and do - it's what comes out of our mouths, as an extension of our hearts, that proves the truth of who we are.

\*\* In applying Jesus' teaching to our world today, I wonder if there aren't *many more* ways we consume or take into ourselves metaphorical "food" - ideologies and opinions, beliefs and convictions - some of which are good food to uplift and nourish us, and some of which are poisonous, spoiling our good health and the happiness in our lives. There are those things which we choose to consume or take into our hearts and minds with our eyes and ears, which will one day be reflected in what comes from us in our language, self image, view of our world, and our actions. For instance, I've stopped watching so much news at the beginning of every day - it simply made me sad or angry, setting the tone for my thinking at the beginning of my day. Although I don't necessarily know what's going on in the world day by day, I'm a much happier person. Maybe ignorance really is bliss! We can choose to eliminate the consumption of certain things from our lives that impact us negatively - overly sexualized violence in TV shows or movies; violent video games available to our children; hateful rhetoric from TV personalities or ruthless political bantering, unhealthy interactions with others because of poor boundaries - these things will have an affect on our spiritual well being. Over time the regular consuming of that which is poison to our souls will be reflected in what we pour out into our lives and relationships around us. Of course, the opposite is also true. When we carefully pick and choose a "diet" of mutually respectful interactions with others, showing mercy and generosity to those around us, frequently expressing our love to those nearest to us, quiet times to consume uplifting books and movies, faithful prayer and Scripture study, physical activity, healthy eating habits, hobbies that express our creativity - all these things can encourage us during these times of challenge and isolation.

\*\* Life is so much more than merely consuming things and people and the popular ideas around us. Jesus teaches us *that very thing* in the second part of this Gospel. Life is about giving of ourselves - humbly opening ourselves to being more than what we thought we knew about any particular issue - even changing some life-long and deeply held belief - It's about being open to conversion of life.

\*\* I believe Jesus demonstrated a transformational change in his thinking and acting when confronted by the gentile, Canaanite woman who would not stop calling out to him on the road. He tried to ignore her calls to him, rationalizing that he was there only for the children of the house of Israel. But her desperate persistence, and her faith that Jesus could heal her daughter gave her the confidence that she needed to actually block his way by throwing herself onto her knees before him and challenging his understanding of his mission. She implored him to consider a different way of thinking: even the dogs under the masters table are allowed to gather the crumbs - she hoped to convince Jesus that even she, a gentile and a woman, was deserving of his merciful, healing response to her needs. Jesus was changed in that moment. In that brief encounter with her, Jesus was challenged to reconsider what he had believed were "the rules" of his life and his mission on the earth. Jesus was moved by her faith and followed his heart: he made a decision to enter into relationship with her by healing her daughter. As a gentile, I am forever grateful to that bold Canaanite woman and her interaction with Our Lord because his gift of inclusion to her has been handed down to all of us!

\*\* Sometimes, in a single moment in time, the things we've believed all our lives can be recast by what we experience. Perhaps some of the beliefs we now carry were formed by events from long ago, which once had power to form us, or which we developed as a coping skill against things we did not understand at the time. Sometimes, those very beliefs *need* to change so that we may evolve in ways which reflect our growth into that which is more. Change is not easy and can be downright traumatic. But truth will not be denied and is crucial to our growth as spiritual beings and followers of Jesus Christ. I invite you to take some time this week to ask God to reveal to you what needs to change in you so that nothing hinders you from becoming the person God calls you to be. Then humbly ask God to anoint you with the power of conversion and the energy and integrity to carry it out into the light of the life you lead.

\*\* Jesus 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...what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart." May we all listen to the words of God and understand. Amen.