

# Needed: A New Heart

Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost

August 20, 2023

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**A** mighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life: Give us grace to receive thankfully the fruits of his redeeming work, and to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

*Romans 11:1-2, 29-32 (NRSV)*

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. <sup>2</sup> God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.

<sup>29</sup> For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. <sup>30</sup> Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, <sup>31</sup> so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. <sup>32</sup> For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

*Matthew 15:10-28 (NRSV)*

[Jesus] called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: <sup>11</sup> it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." <sup>12</sup> Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" <sup>13</sup> He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. <sup>14</sup> Let them alone; they are blind

guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.”<sup>15</sup> But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.”<sup>16</sup> Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding?<sup>17</sup> Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?<sup>18</sup> But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.<sup>19</sup> For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.<sup>20</sup> These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

<sup>21</sup> Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.<sup>22</sup> 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.”<sup>23</sup> 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.”<sup>24</sup> He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”<sup>25</sup> But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.”<sup>26</sup> He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”<sup>27</sup> She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”<sup>28</sup> Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

We have two movements or two chapters in this morning’s gospel reading. First, we have Jesus telling the crowd that, contrary to what the Pharisees teach, it’s not what goes into our mouths that makes us unclean before God, but what comes out of them. And then we have his encounter with a Canaanite woman whose daughter has a demon and asks him to heal her.

These two accounts may seem different, but they are related because they serve to show off the greatness of what Jesus has come to accomplish in human beings—men and women and boys and girls.

Our reading begins at verse 10 of Matthew 15. It’s helpful to know that in the previous 9 verses Jesus has a conflict with the Pharisees, who criticize him for allowing his disciples to eat without first washing their hands. They insist this is a violation of **“the tradition of the elders.”** (Matthew 15:2 NRSV) Jesus comes back with the fact that the Pharisees violate not tradition, but **“the commandment of God”** to **“honor your father and mother.”** The Pharisees had a policy allowing people to designate money to the Temple that would otherwise be used to support their aged parents. He quotes Isaiah’s prediction

that **“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.”** (Matthew 15:8-9, quoting Isaiah 29:13 NRSV)

Then begins the passage we read a few minutes ago. It begins, **“then he called the crowd to him and said to them . . .”** Jesus warns his followers about the danger of reducing their faith to rule-following, and not a matter of heart obedience to God. We need to stop a minute and consider what the Bible means by our heart. I think in our culture we think of our heart as our deeply-felt emotions. We say, **“I love you with all my heart.”** But for Jesus and his followers, it meant the whole inner person—our mind, our emotions, our will, our character, our consciousness, and so forth.

The idea of ritual defilement was very familiar to Jesus’ followers. He uses it to make his point that it’s not dirt from our hands that makes us unclean in God’s eyes. Rather, it’s what’s inside. He says, **“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.”**

In any relationship there have to be rules. The basic rules of courtesy, saying “please” and “thank you,” or complimenting someone for a job well done, are two examples. But rules only govern what’s on the surface. Good relationships are made of respect, honor, trust, sacrifice, and thinking of the other person’s needs and goals in life. There aren’t rules for these. They come from inside, from who we are. Or in Jesus’ terms, from the heart. Defilement isn’t a matter of ingesting dirt from unwashed hands, but from sinful thoughts in our hearts that lead to sinful attitudes and behavior.

Which brings us to the second part of today’s gospel reading. Here Jesus has traveled with his disciples to an area near the Mediterranean coast. It’s a primarily Gentile area. Among Jewish people in Jesus’ time, everyone knew that non-Jews were to be avoided. They were outside of God’s covenant. But from this point of view, the people who lived in Tyre and Sidon were even worse because they were descended from Israel’s ancient enemies the Canaanites.

Into this charged atmosphere comes Jesus. A Canaanite woman, desperate to have her deranged daughter healed of demonic oppression, shouts out to him for help: **“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.”** Jesus doesn’t respond, but that doesn’t discourage her. She keeps on shouting. The disciples are annoyed, to the

point where they ask Jesus to send her away. Jesus finally says something: **“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”** But the woman won’t take “no” for an answer. She kneels at his feet and says, **“Lord, help me.”**

Then comes one of the most misunderstood conversational exchanges in the gospels. Jesus says, **“It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”** To which the woman responds, **“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”**

What is going on here? Is Jesus really insulting this needy woman to her face? No. The key to understanding this is the context. Jesus says he was sent only to the Jewish people—**“the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”** But he doesn’t mean that some Jewish people are lost sheep and some aren’t. They’re all lost, because they are following human rules instead of obeying God from the heart, and harboring ethnic hatred against non-Jewish people like the Canaanites. In fact, even though she’s a Canaanite from Tyre and Sidon, this woman is demonstrating more faith than many of the Jewish people Jesus has encountered.

Earlier in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus pronounces woes on the Jewish villages he has visited and compares their lack of faith in him to Tyre and Sidon’s. In Matthew 11:21-22 he says, **“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you.”**

She calls him **“Son of David.”** She perseveres in getting his attention because she knows he has the authority as the Son of God to command the demon to leave her daughter. Jesus isn’t insulting this woman. He’s testing her faith, and she comes through with flying colors.

These two stories together show us how desperately human beings need Jesus. His diagnosis is that sin begins in the heart. Like any other sin, ethnic or racial hatred originates in our hearts. Without Jesus, every racial or ethnic group is **“lost sheep.”** Why? Because their hearts harbor the kind of thoughts that lead to sinful attitudes and behavior. Just look at the world we live in. This is what Paul says in the final verse of our reading from Romans: **“God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.”**

The Jews in Jesus' time felt they had the privilege of living in covenant with the one true God, and looked down on other groups as a result. But they ignored God's promise to their ancestor Abraham that through him God would bless **"all the families of the earth."** (**Genesis 12:3 NRSV**). They ignored the New Covenant that God was to make and has made in the life and death of Jesus with all who put their faith in Christ, regardless of their ethnicity.

In that covenant, God promises to give us a new heart. Hundreds of years before Jesus, the Lord spoke through Jeremiah and said, **"The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."** (**Jeremiah 31:31-33 NRSV**)

Through the prophet Ezekiel God says, **"A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."** (**Ezekiel 36:26 NRSV**)

The human race doesn't need more rules. People need God to remake their hearts by faith in the Son of God, who loved us and gave himself for us, who pours out his Holy Spirit freely into those who believe in him. Today is Helping and Healing Sunday here at St. David's. The healing we all need is for our hearts to be conformed to God's love, God's care and God's compassion for all people. So as you or others come forward for healing prayer, pray that through his Holy Spirit God will give you his heart to trust in Jesus and live the life he has for you in him.

Amen.