Sermon, August 20, 2023

Matthew 15: 10-28

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

How much of a rule follower are you? You know the saying…rules are meant to be broken. Today’s gospel has two stories about rules and about those who break them.

First Jesus gathers the crowd and tells them that it isn’t what goes in your mouth that defiles, but what comes out of the mouth. In other words, it’s not what you eat, but what you say that can tarnish or spoil you.

Apparently, the Pharisees were also listening and went to the disciples to complain about what Jesus had said. They ask Jesus if he knows that he has offended them. This is not the first time the Pharisees have found offense at Jesus’ words. It’s not the first time they have been upset that he is not following the rules.

In chapter 9, the Pharisees confronted the disciples about not fasting. Then they question how Jesus’ disciples could glean wheat and heal on the Sabbath. Now here is Jesus seeming to go against the purity rules.

There are all kinds of rules and regulations about what to eat, how to clean the pots and dishes, how to cook the food and even how to properly wash one’s hands before eating. If you didn’t do it correctly, or worse, at all, you were defiled. Once defiled, you had to perform more rituals to become clean again.

Jesus is not concerned that the Pharisees have found offense in his teaching. He tells his disciples to not be concerned with their opinion. They are not following the true laws of God—to love God and to love one another—because they forget to focus on love and not the laws themselves.

They are unable to see the truth so they are like the blind leading the blind. They and their followers will only come to an unproductive and fruitless end.

Peter asks for an explanation of the parable. A parable can be a one sentence saying. So which parable or saying is Peter seeking to be explained? The one about the mouth and what goes in and out of it? The one about the plants? Or the one about the blind person?

We can see Jesus shaking his head at Peter. He returns to the most important parable, the one he shared with the crowds. The Pharisees and their ignorance isn’t what he needs to focus on. He needs to focus on bigger things.

He admonishes Peter. Don’t you get it yet? Whatever you eat, just goes into your stomach and out the other end! That piece of bread and that piece of fish you had for breakfast is just going to go down the toilet. Whether you ritually washed your hands or the cooking pot or the plate doesn’t really matter.

What matters is what you say, for that is connected to what is in your heart. These words can lead to bad actions. And actions may speak louder than words. Jesus lists some of the actions that defile….murder, theft, slander. These are all against the rules set up by the Ten Commandments.

He talks about sin. It is our sin that defiles us, the thing that keeps us from righteousness, the thing that separate us from God.

All the Old Testament laws were meant to foster the relationship between God and his people. These laws also governed the relationship between God’s people. By the time Jesus came along, the laws were so rigid, that they were much better at hindering relationships than fostering them.

The cheeseburger you had for lunch isn’t going to make you better or worse in your relationships. What you did after that cheeseburger is what mattered. Your words and actions that come from within either build or break down relationships. They show your defilement or your cleanliness.

This story began with the Pharisees questioning Jesus about observing traditions dealing with the washing of hands. Jesus moves the conversation to what is truly important—observing tradition or observing relationships.

Matthew places another story that includes food next in his gospel. It also has to do with Jesus’ focus on relationships over tradition.

Jesus travels north to the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon. This area is mostly populated by Gentiles. A crowd doesn’t come out to meet Jesus. A lone woman does and she is shouting for Jesus to have mercy on her. She recognizes him as Lord, son of David.

She begs Jesus to help her daughter, who is tormented by a demon. At first Jesus makes no response to her. This seems like a strange thing for Jesus to do. The disciples step in and tell Jesus to send her away as they are tired of her calling after them.

He doesn’t send her away, but tells the disciples that he was sent for the lost sheep of Israel. The woman persists in asking Jesus for help..

He replies to her with mysterious words about not taking the children’s food and feeding it to the dogs. Her response is as mysterious…even the dogs eat the crumbs from their master’s table. With those words, Jesus praises her great faith and her daughter is healed.

Many take Jesus’ statement about the lost sheep of Israel to mean that Jesus believes he came only for the Jewish people. Why then, would he purposely travel in Gentile territory? What if Jesus’ meaning of the lost sheep of Israel is much greater than the Jewish people?

Our readings from Isaiah, Psalms and Romans each talk about how all nations, all people, will be invited into the people of God. No matter what nation you are from, no matter if you are Jew or Gentile, all will receive God’s mercy.

Jesus makes clear it is what is in the heart that defiles a person. Yes, all sin comes from within, but in God’s mercy, faith also is found within.

The Canaanite woman is not defined by her nationality and not being Jewish. She is defined by her faith. She recognizes Jesus for who he is…Lord, Son of David. Regardless of her background, she believes that Jesus is the one who can help her.

When she tells Jesus that even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table, she is telling him that she knows she is deserving of the gifts of God. The Jewish people have been the chosen ones, the ones at the table, but there are others who benefit from God’s graciousness as well.

These two stories contrast the faith of the Pharisees with the faith of the Canaanite woman. The Pharisees are locked into their way of being righteous. It is by following the rules, the laws, and remaining distant from others so they may not be defiled.

In Tyre and Sidon, a woman…a woman!..approaches Jesus. And she is a Canaanite, a Gentile, calling after a man. There would be not many other ways to become defiled than to speak with a Gentile woman.

Is that why Jesus hesitates in answering her? I’m still working on that part of the story. Perhaps it is to give the disciples time to consider helping her or not. Perhaps Jesus wants to see if she will persist to show her faith in him. Perhaps Matthew wants to give his readers a bit of suspense….will Jesus help her or not?

In any case, Jesus does help her. She asks for help from one who seems to have no good reason to help her. She is not Jewish. She is a woman. She is unclean by having a daughter with a demon.

But she has faith. She calls on God’s saving health, as it says in Psalm 67, to be known to her daughter. And Jesus makes God’s way known on earth, or on that day, in the foreign regions of Tyre and Sidon.

Hearing these two stories, linked together in Matthew and in our lectionary for today, perhaps we are to ask ourselves….how much of a rule follower are we? Are we more like the Pharisees and want to cling to rules and regulations? Are we like the disciples who want to get away from those who don’t follow the rules?

Our churches are often seen as places of rules and regulations. Some things have changed over the years. It used to be that men had to wear a suit and tie to church and women had to wear a dress and often a hat. As we look around this morning, I see fewer suits and dresses than more casual clothes and not one hat.

The thing about rules is that they often divide us rather than unite us. Rather than welcoming those who may not observe the same rules as we do, we shut them out.

Jesus was an incredible rule breaker. He always put people over and above the rules. He healed on the Sabbath, ate meals without ritual handwashing and then ate with…gasp…sinners and tax collectors. He traveled in Gentile circles and even healed a Gentile woman who broke about every rule in the book.

I’m not saying life is a free for all. But there is a time to consider if the rule is helpful or hurtful. At our Bible study on Friday, I mentioned a friend who questioned those who washed their hands the “wrong way.” She said everyone knew that you wet your hands before you put the soap on them. And she turned to me, saying… you know that, don’t you, Jan?

Apparently she had seen someone putting the soap on first and was appalled. It’s a silly example, but that is not far from what the Pharisees were complaining about. They let such a rule, silly to us today, separate them from those they were meant to love and care for.

As we consider the rules we may have set for ourselves, we must first consider how they unite us rather than divide us. Each of us has been in disobedience to the rules…to God…but God rains his mercy on each of us. Let us rain a bit of that mercy on others. Amen.