

Words Count and Faith Matters

Genesis 45:1-15

¹Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him; and he cried, “Make every one go out from me.” So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ²And he wept aloud, so that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. ³And Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph; is my father still alive?” But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence. ⁴So Joseph said to his brothers, “Come near to me, I pray you.” And they came near. And he said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. ⁷And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸So it was not you who sent me here, but God; and he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. ⁹Make haste and go up to my father and say to him, ‘Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not tarry; ¹⁰you shall dwell in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children, and your flocks, your herds, and all that you have; ¹¹and there I will provide for you, for there are yet five years of famine to come; lest you and your household, and all that you have, come to poverty.’ ¹²And now your eyes see, and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see, that it is my mouth that speaks to you. ¹³You must tell my father of all my splendor in Egypt, and of all that you have seen. Make haste and bring my father down here.” ¹⁴Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept; and Benjamin wept upon his neck. ¹⁵And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Psalm 133 (UMH 850)

¹Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!
²It is like the precious oil upon the head, running down upon the beard, upon the beard of Aaron,
running down on the collar of his robes!
³It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion!
For there the LORD has commanded the blessing, life for evermore.

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

¹I 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. ²God has not rejected his

people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel?

²⁹For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable. ³⁰Just as you were once disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹so they have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may receive mercy. ³²For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all.

Matthew 15:(10-20) 21-28

¹Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ²“Why do your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.” ³He answered them, “And why do you transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴For God commanded, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him surely die.’ ⁵But you say, ‘If any one tells his father or his mother, What you would have gained from me is given to God, he need not honor his father.’ ⁶So, for the sake of your tradition, you have made void the word of God. ⁷You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: ⁸‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; ⁹in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’”

¹⁰And he called the people to him and said to them, “Hear and understand: ¹¹not what goes into the mouth defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man.”

¹²Then the disciples came and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?” ¹³He answered, “Every plant which my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. ¹⁴Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit.” ¹⁵But Peter said to him, “Explain the parable to us.” ¹⁶And he said, “Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and so passes on? ¹⁸But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a man. ¹⁹For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.

²⁰These are what defile a man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.”

²¹And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²²And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and cried, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon.” ²³But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, “Send her away, for she is crying after us.” ²⁴He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” ²⁵But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” ²⁶And he answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” ²⁷She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” ²⁸Then Jesus answered her, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And

her daughter was healed instantly.

Revised Standard Version of the Bible

Last week, when I was being the liturgist over there at the other pulpit, we heard about the story of Joseph and how he was sold into slavery by his brothers. It's a familiar story from the Bible that we were all familiar with - even before Donny Osmond brought the story to Broadway with his Technicolor Dreamcoat. This week we hear the end of the story. Joseph is now a powerful man in Egypt and meets his brothers as they travel to Egypt to escape a famine. It is another one of the many interesting stories that make up the book of Genesis.

Words count and Faith matters. That is a lesson we can take from the Matthew Scripture reading you just heard. What you say and what you believe *are* important.

In this week's scripture passage from Matthew Jesus talks about both of these things. Right at the beginning, we read: ¹⁰*And he called the people to him and said to them, "Hear and understand: ¹¹not what goes into the mouth defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man."* What prompted Jesus to say this?

Well, lets back up to the beginning of this chapter of Matthew, before this week's Bible passage picks up. Starting there we read how Scribes and Pharisees have traveled from Jerusalem up to Galilee to learn more about Jesus. When they got there, they saw Jesus and his disciples and the disciples were eating without washing their hands first. For the Scribes and Pharisees, not washing your hands before you eat is a big deal. A very big deal. It's even a bigger deal for them than it was for your mother when you were growing up. You see - the Jewish law that had been built up over the preceding hundreds of years was full of rules about how faithful Jews were supposed to live their lives. And one of those rules was that you had to wash your hands before you touched food, or you would become unclean. You would be defiled.

The basic dispute dividing Jesus and the Pharisees here is that of "man-made" tradition vs. God's law. Jewish tradition has its roots in good motives. While the laws in the Torah included a great deal of detail, they did not try and cover every possible scenario. Rabbis who loved God and wanted to keep the law faithfully developed the Mishnah (compiled 200 B.C. to 135 A.D.) and the Talmud (compiled 250-500 A.D) to correct this "deficiency," producing works that filled nearly 36,000 pages. Intended to be helpful guidance for people who might otherwise stumble into error, these works eventually took on an authority nearly equal to the Torah itself.

In their desire to be comprehensive, rabbis expanded the law far beyond its original intent. In some cases, they took a rule intended for a specific group, such as priests, and applied it to everyone -- or they took a rule applicable to a specific situation and expanded it to cover every situation. They went into nearly infinite detail, making the law more complex and more binding with each word. And the exceptions to the rules were as precise and tortured as their rules were. It was rule making run amok.

When Jesus heard the Scribes and Pharisees criticizing his disciples for not washing their hands before they ate - one of those “man-made” rules - he called them hypocrites. Jesus called their attention to their own failure to keep God's law to honor their father and mother -- one of the Ten Commandments -- but an exception permitted by their tradition.

Now you know why Jesus said what he did *“Hear and understand: ¹¹not what goes into the mouth defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man.”* Jesus elaborates further after his disciples ask him to explain what he has said. ¹⁷*Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and so passes on? ¹⁸But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a man. ¹⁹For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰These are what defile a man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.”*

And Jesus can't resist another poke at the Scribes and Pharisees. He is told by the disciples *“Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?”* ¹³*He answered, “Every plant which my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. ¹⁴Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit.”* And now you know where the saying “the blind leading the blind” came from. You can't say that I don't give you useful information in these sermons.

Jesus hits the nail on the head when he says that “what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a man.” Whoever made up the saying *“Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.”*, has it totally wrong. Many times words hurt much more than stick and stones do. Anyone that has been teased and taunted as a child in school, anyone who has endured comments about their looks, or their weight, or how poor they are, the color of their skin, the clothes they wear, what their parents did for a living, or what church they went to - knows that words hurt. And that hurt can last a long, long time.

Words *do* count. What comes out of our mouth *does* matter.

The movie Chocolat is a wonderful movie with many good messages in it, and - I think - more than a little Christian imagery. If you have never seen the movie, I would urge you

to rent it and watch it sometime.

The movie takes place in a small town in France in 1959. The town has always expressed their community life using the word “tranquility”. You knew what was expected of you, you knew what your place was. And if you happened to forget, someone would remind you. They trusted the wisdom of ages past, lived with the values of tradition, family, and morality.

The small French town had been kept "clean" by the Comte de Reynaud and his family ever since the first Comte ran off the Huguenots hundreds of years before. The Comte is sort of the local aristocrat or community leader. He controls everything, even writing the young parish priest's Sunday sermons. He is meticulous, especially in observing Lent.

Into this town comes Vianne, played by Juliette Binoche. She does not go to church, has a daughter without a father present, and she has the gall to open a chocolate shop during Lent! As she opens the shop and conducts her business, it becomes clear that she is anything but traditional. The chocolates she creates seem to magically feed the needs of everyone who eats them. She and the chocolates seem to have the power to change peoples lives.

Vianne does nothing by the book. She does nothing out of obligation, but everything out of love. It is her encouragement that brings a towns woman Josephine out of her abusive marriage. It is her encouragement that brings another woman - Armande together with her estranged daughter and grandson. It is her encouragement that brings a widow of 30-some-years out of mourning and into a new romantic relationship. The town is transformed by her chocolate shop and by her grace.

The Comte, who has become increasingly enraged by the actions of Vianne, decides that she must be stopped, and he urges the townspeople to boycott her chocolate shop and help him drive her out of town. Just as events come to a boil, the timid young priest of the local parish, Pere Henri's gives the Easter Sermon - a sermon that was *not* written or approved by the Comte: “I want to talk about Christ’s humanity, I mean how he lived his life on earth: his kindness, his tolerance. We must measure our goodness, not by what we don’t do, what we deny ourselves, what we resist, or who we exclude. Instead, we should measure ourselves by what we embrace, what we create, and who we include.”

Even as the priest is giving his sermon, Vianne is closing her shop and preparing to leave town. But she leaves behind a town of people - including the Comte - that have been changed by her words, her presence, and the gifts she has given them.

I told you there was a lot of Christian imagery in the movie.

After his run in with the Scribes and Pharisees, Matthew says that Jesus withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Tyre and Sidon are coastal towns in what is now Lebanon, and are the furthest north that Jesus traveled during his ministry. Although they are closer to Galilee than Jerusalem is, they are not a part of the Jewish lands - being inhabited by Canaanites. It is one of these Canaanites, a woman that Jesus and his disciples encounter while walking along.

The woman apparently knew something about Jews because she calls Jesus a “Son of David”. She also must know something of Jesus and his reputation for healing because she comes up to him and asks him to heal her daughter, who is possessed with a demon. Now at that time, Canaanites were not held in very high esteem by the Jews. Not only did they not believe in God like the Jews did, but they didn’t practice any of the laws that the Jews did. And we have already seen what a big deal that is. If the Scribes and Pharisees are shocked at the disciples not washing their hands before they eat, just imagine how they feel about people that don’t believe or follow *any* of their rules.

That reminds me of a story . . .

The disciples are apparently not above believing that Canaanites were inferior and unclean, even after being scolded by the Scribes and Pharisees, because they ask Jesus to send her away. At first Jesus ignores the woman, but she continues to beg him to heal her daughter. When he finally answers the woman, he says “*It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.*” He seems to be telling her that she is wasting his time, that he needs to spend his time and efforts on the Jews, not the Canaanites.

That seems to be a harsh thing to say to the woman. It doesn’t sound like the sort of thing that Jesus *ought* to be saying. Several of the Bible scholars and preachers that I read in preparing the sermon are also troubled by Jesus’s treatment of the Canaanite woman. Some scholars have suggested that Jesus is joking with the woman, a sort of playful banter between him and her. After all, both Jesus and the woman know about what Jews think of Canaanites. Others feel that since the writer Matthew is writing this Gospel primarily for a Jewish audience, he is playing this aspect up for his intended audience. Maybe the way a prejudiced white writer would have referred to a black person in the American South in the days of slavery before the Civil War.

Still other scholars believe that Jesus is testing the woman to see how serious she is about having her daughter healed. That is - Jesus is making her work for it, not letting her off easy. Making sure that she is not just after some quick and cheap magic trick And some

feel that Jesus genuinely didn't want to help the woman, and had to be convinced by her that she deserved his attention.

We might note that the original Greek word for dog, as used in these passages, refers to a family pet type of dog, rather than a wild, stray type of dog, so even if Jesus really is calling her a dog, it is as much an affectionate term as a derogatory term. The Canaanite woman apparently notes the difference, because she answers Jesus, saying : "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

We are tempted to say "Touche!" The woman has a ready answer for Jesus, and she isn't going to give up. Jesus, of course, sees her dogged determination (Sorry, I couldn't resist the pun!), and rewards her faith and persistence, saying: "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.

What is the moral of the parable of the Canaanite woman? Well you know that already from the title of the sermon. Faith matters. The Canaanite woman had faith that Jesus could and would heal her daughter. She kept the faith, even when the disciples tried to get rid of her. Even when Jesus implies that she and her daughter are not worthy of his help, she believes and doesn't give up. She persists until she is rewarded. What a great moral for you and I. If we believe and don't give up, eventually we *will* be rewarded.

So today's Gospel reading contains both a word of warning and a word of hope. A warning that we need to be careful what we say and what we think. What we say *is* important, what we believe in our hearts defines us and *can* make the difference between good and evil in our lives and the lives of those around us. And a word of hope that if we believe and don't give up, God will reward our faith. And that is the good news!

Amen.