

11th Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 15 – August 20, 2017
Matthew 15:10-28

Matters of the Heart

Not for the first time do I marvel at the timeliness of the lectionary. The Gospel reading for today was chosen back in 1983 by an ecumenical committee representing some 20 Christian denominations in America and Canada. Imagine a group of scholars and liturgy wonks sitting around a table somewhere, parsing out the bits of Matthew's Gospel to be read on this, the 11th Sunday after Pentecost.

1983 – that was back in the days before the internet, or cell phones, or 9/11 – before the Twin Towers fell, the alt-right rose, and “bi-partisan” became a dirty word in Washington, D.C. That was before Donald Trump took up residence in the White House, before last weekend's march on Charlottesville. Before the slaughter in Barcelona.

How could those folks on The Consultation on Common Texts have known that on this day, after the week that has just past, these sayings of Jesus would be such a word in season? It is as though the Lord himself is speaking directly to you and me.

True, the issue that confronted Matthew's church in the first century is not precisely our issue. You and I are not much concerned with whether to follow the dietary laws of ancient Israel. We don't worry today that the bits of ham in the green beans at the covered dish supper will make us ritually unclean or “defiled,” as Matthew puts it. We are long past worrying about *that kind* of purity.

But “purity” is an issue right now. For the so-called “alt-right” and the Neo-Nazis who marched on Charlottesville, purity is at the top of their agenda. Not only do they seek racial purity, and along with it the subordination of those who are not, by their definition, “white.” They seek also a kind of moral purity. It is, of course, a twisted and corrupt kind of purity – infused with hate and seething with resentment. A very *impure purity*, I suppose you could call it, but a kind of purity nonetheless.

These folks fancy themselves superior to those who don't look like them, or agree with their racist ideology. They seem to feel that even to breathe the same air as African-Americans, Jews, or lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, or transgendered people is to suffer a kind of defilement.

And so, they march. They light their tiki torches and hold them high. They spout their vicious slogans and reclaim the symbols of a shameful past – a past which includes lynching, Kristallnacht, and Holocaust – all for the sake of purity.

Jesus has a word for us about the pursuit of that kind of purity. **“Listen and understand,”** he says, **“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, and that is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person...”**

Look within your own heart, Jesus is telling us. Examine your own soul. If what is coming out of your mouth is hatred, resentment, violence and disdain for your neighbor, then the problem is not with your neighbor; it's with you. It's not external. It's internal.

To use the language familiar to many Christians, your heart is not “right with God.” It is not “well with your soul.” It is time to repent and ask God to cleanse your heart.

Those folks in Matthew's church are still trying to get their heads around this radical idea when Matthew springs another Jesus story on them. It's a surprising story – a shocking story, really. A foreign woman – a Canaanite – the walking personification of impurity, approaches Jesus and pleads *Kyrie eleison* – “Lord, have mercy.” Her daughter is tormented by a demon, and she needs Jesus to make her whole again.

Jesus responds with a brusque and, to our ears, intemperate retort. What she asks of Jesus would require him to cross a line between Jews and Canaanites – a line traced in blood for many generations. **“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,”** Jesus insists.

But this woman will not give up. She will not be silent. She is willing to settle for the crumbs falling from the table of God's infinite mercy, but she will not let Jesus continue to maintain that God's mercy is for his tribe and his tribe alone.

Then Jesus' own heart, which seems a bit hardened in that moment, opens to this foreign woman. He sees, I imagine, not a Gentile who will defile him, but a child of God who is as much his sister as any fellow Hebrew.

“Woman,” he says, “great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish.”

I like to think that when the Jewish Christians in Matthew’s church heard Jesus say that, their own hearts opened a little, and they saw their Gentile fellow believers in a different light. Their own hearts became enlightened by a gospel deeper and broader than they had imagined. With the eyes of their hearts enlightened,¹ they saw the “wideness of God’s mercy that is wider than the sea.”

God alone knows what’s in the hearts of those who brought tiki torches and Nazi flags to that peaceful little city in the Blue Ridge Mountains, but my guess is, they would not like the way this story in Matthew’s gospel turns out. They would have preferred that Jesus turn his back on this foreign woman. Judging from what came out of their mouths, the hearts of those who marched on Charlottesville are profoundly defiled.

Regrettably, the same must be said of our President, who cannot distinguish the difference between those who spew hatred and violence and those who stand for equality, justice, and mercy. For him, both groups of people stand on the same moral plane. Both are somehow equally responsible for what happened last week. It is as though he blames the paper for igniting when touched with the burning flame.

By now it’s clear that our President is not equipped to speak with even a modicum of moral authority. He just doesn’t have the heart for it.

I don’t know why. I don’t know what forces stunted his moral development. I don’t know why his heart is so terribly small or his vision so limited.

Perhaps, as some say, his acute narcissism renders him incapable of empathy. His mouth speaks such vitriol because his heart is turned inward upon itself. He cannot accept moral correction because he fears that if he does, he will become diminished. So, whenever he is challenged, he lashes out with ever-increasing malice.

Whatever forces have formed Mr. Trump into the person that he is, it is manifestly clear that we cannot expect him to provide Americans with moral guidance in these difficult times.

¹ Ephesians 1:18

I remember how President Bush appeared at the Islamic Center in Washington, D.C., shortly after 9/11, and pleaded with Americans not to harden their hearts against Muslims. "Islam is peace," he said.

And how President Obama preached that sermon after the murders in Charleston. Has there ever been a time in our country's history when a sitting president led a congregation in the singing of *Amazing Grace*?

Those were two of our finest moments. Those two presidents, different as they are, evoked from us our better selves. They reminded us of our values and united us in common purpose and resolve.

You will not hear Mr. Trump leading such a song. He is morally tone deaf. He has a tin ear and a shriveled heart. And as Jesus reminds us, from the heart comes that which defiles.

Knowing that we cannot look toward the White House, brothers and sisters, we should look toward God Almighty, the Father of Mercies. We should lift our eyes toward the throne of grace and justice, and behold the Lord Jesus, sitting at the right hand of the Ruler of the Universe.

We must put our faith in the Triune God, and listen to God's word to us today. We must ask God to renew our confidence and to embolden our hearts to resist and to proclaim --to resist the evil that defiles and to proclaim the love which shall never end – the love revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord.

We don't need a president to help us do that. We never did, and we never will.