

“Who’s In? Who’s Out?”

Matthew 15:10-28

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We don’t make it easy. Our mothers and fathers in faith, and their mothers and fathers, learned the appropriate ways to approach God. In Jewish tradition, this includes the 613 commandments of the law, the rules and traditions that faithful believers embraced. Some of these seem right and good to our post-modern ears:

Remember the Passover, and recall the Exodus from Egypt; that is, remember that God rescued us from slavery.

Worship no idols, and do not take God’s name in vain.

Do not murder or testify falsely or covet.

Respect your parents.

Lend to the poor and destitute, and do not oppress the weak.

Leave gleanings for the poor.

Do not bear a grudge or take revenge.

Repent and confess wrongdoing.

Do not appear at the Temple without offerings, and give charity to the poor.

Others seem strange to us:

Do not eat the meat of an animal mortally wounded.

Do not eat mixtures of meat and milk cooked together.

Do not eat any non-kosher animals.

Observe all the laws of impurity.

Do not lend with interest.

Wear phylacteries on the head and tefillin on the arm, and put a mezuzah on each door post.

The king must not have too many wives.

Destroy the seven Canaanite nations, and wipe out the descendants of Amalek.

Do not wear clothing of mixed fibers.

Pay all wages on the very day they are earned.

We didn’t make it easy for those beyond the chosen people of God to become a part of the community of faith.

Jesus directly assaulted the laws of impurity, of hand washing, and ritual cleansing, when he proclaimed, “It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person.” It was upsetting and deeply disappointing to all the people of God who did their very best to uphold and keep all the laws and traditions, that they might be worthy before the Lord. But Jesus was clear: it is what comes out of the mouth—what proceeds from the heart—that defiles us: evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, false witness, slander.

Sometimes I and perhaps you are so busy keeping the outward rules that we overlook what is truly most important about our lives. Do we really believe it does us any good to put on our Sunday best and come to worship if we abuse our neighbors or sleep with that person who is not our wife or our husband, if we lie and criticize and demean and cheat?

We don’t make it easy. Our mothers and fathers in faith, and their mothers and

fathers before them, learned the appropriate ways to approach God. In American Protestantism, this includes all kinds of ritual and routine and special language.

We sit quietly on pews or rows of seats and stand when directed to sing or speak responsively. We use metaphorical language in our liturgy and songs and sermons, this morning about chains and wells and houses and directions. We speak of the “session” and the “narthex” even though newcomers almost need a dictionary to define those terms. We place or pretend to place our offerings in the plate as it is passed, although many of us don’t even bother to pretend, giving only one percent or one-half of one percent of our income to the work of the church.

Often I and perhaps you are so busy attending to all these traditions that we overlook what is most important about our lives. Do we truly think it helpful to go through the motions of listening and reflecting and singing and giving halfheartedly

if we hold tight to our grudges and overlook the needy?

if we ignore our neighbors, both down the row of seats/pew and across the street?

if we care nothing about the people of eastern Ukraine and the refugees on Sinjar Mountain?

if we care nothing about justice in Ferguson, Missouri?

if we deny the prevalence of continuing racism, alive and well on the streets of America?

if we turn away from unaccompanied children, seeking to escape the violence of the streets in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula?

Do we become insiders by keeping the rules and traditions, without addressing the orientation of the heart, the choices, and the everyday decisions of our lives? Can we become God’s children by sitting and standing and singing and keeping quiet at all the right times during worship, while ignoring injustice? Or does life in Christ demand change?

We don’t make it easy for ourselves. In our deep desire to believe that we are good enough, honest enough, sound enough, fair enough, we have a terrible way of drawing the circle around ourselves, that we may be inside even if others are out.

We don’t make it easy. If you were listening very carefully some time ago, five chapters earlier in Matthew’s gospel, when Jesus is commissioning the apostles, as he grants them authority to cure every disease and heal every illness, as he charges them to be a force for love in the world, proclaiming the good news, cleansing the lepers, casting out demons, raising the dead, he also says this, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles. Go instead to the house of Israel.” Even Jesus says to bless the insiders, our people, our friends and neighbors. Not those others.

And then we reach the last eight verses of this morning’s lesson which shake our foundations. A Canaanite woman, an outsider, a Gentile approaches Jesus shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord; heal my daughter.” There is nothing appropriate about the way she approaches. It is shocking to our post-modern ears.

If we are only eager to identify the insiders and outsiders, then you and I know this: the church is simply *not* a place for shouting, for someone to show up and interrupt. Being with Jesus, we believe, is done decently and in order, with decorum and aplomb. But we cannot help but hear her prayer.

Have mercy on me, Lord. I am broken.

Have mercy on me. My daughter is possessed, and I cannot help her.

Have mercy on me. I do not know what to do.

Have mercy on me, Lord. I need help.

Have mercy on me.

No matter who we are or how far we have come this morning, we know that prayer. No matter how wrongly worthy I or perhaps you may sometimes feel, we know that prayer. No matter how many of the 613 traditions we keep, we still know that prayer. Have mercy on me, Lord:

I am afraid my parents never loved me. Have mercy on me, Lord.

I was so unfair to my children. I don't know what to say to them. Have mercy on me, Lord.

I cheated on my wife. Have mercy on me, Lord.

I only give leftovers to church and charity. Have mercy on me, Lord.

I'm afraid my husband will never get well. Have mercy on me, Lord.

All we do is fuss and fight. Have mercy on me, Lord.

I can't stop drinking or cursing or criticizing or holding that grudge. Have mercy on me, Lord.

My life is coming to a close. Have mercy on me, Lord.

It is the prayer, I believe, that God always hears, when we scream it or sob it or whisper it.

But, at this moment, Jesus does not hear it. He says, "I was sent only to Israel, not to you Gentiles. It is not fair to take the children's food, the food belonging to the children of Israel, and throw it to the dogs, the Canaanites, the Gentiles, the outsiders." But this woman, this Canaanite, this person who does not keep the law and traditions, this outsider who does not know how to read a bulletin or worship appropriately, she persists. "Help me, Lord," she prays. "Yes, Lord," she responds, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs." And Jesus is dumbfounded. He recognizes her faith, her persistence, her deep desire for transformation and healing, and he grants her desire. Jesus changes. Jesus grows. And he invites us to do the same.

Jae Won Lee taught New Testament for eight years at McCormick Seminary. He writes this: "This woman who is socially marginalized breaks through external differences to claim God's mercy. She shouts her demands at Jesus. Again and again, she violates boundaries of ethnicity, heritage, religion, gender, and demon possession. And Jesus is big enough not to be ashamed to learn something from a Gentile Canaanite woman."

Remember the charge of Christ in Matthew 10, when he is commissioning the apostles, "Go only to Israel"? The word is far different at the close of the gospel, in the Great Commission, when the resurrected Christ commands his followers to go and make disciples of *all* nations.

Sisters and brothers, you and I are invited to listen and watch for the Holy Spirit, even when the Spirit's appearing is strange and surprising, in the most unexpected places. You and I are invited never to give only just enough and do only just enough to try to become insiders, but to speak and forgive and share beyond any human measure, offering our very best in Christ's name.

We don't make it easy. But the Lord has mercy on us, that we may offer mercy to others, every day, to God's glory.