



WEDNESDAY, JULY 22, 2015
MATTHEW 15:10-28

FIRST LUTHERAN, MARSHALL
PASTOR SCOTT FULLER

If it Quacks like a Duck...

As I mentioned in the announcements, two significant things happen in this 15th chapter of Matthew's Gospel. In verses 1-20, we witness a pitched battle between the Pharisees and Jesus, over the notion of what it means to be **clean** or **unclean**:

-the Pharisees are those who do what is required, thereby proving (to **themselves**, anyway!) that they are beloved children of God, *as opposed to*

-those who do **not** always do what is required, thereby proving to the do-gooders that they are unclean in spirit and do not deserve to be called **children of God**.

Then in the **last** section of the chapter, see this issue **reversed**, and played out in the **nations** of the **world**.

Clean and unclean... You **got** it about the children's sermon, right? The **ugly duckling** – in our Creator's eyes – was really a beautiful...**chicken**. But we human beings also want to categorize people – embracing only those who: think, act, look, sound, behave as we do!

That's the Pharisees – they're the **symbol** of who and what we all are at our sinfully best! Don't get me wrong - the Pharisees were good people – in **some** ways, the best **kind** of people. **They** were folks you'd want to have as **neighbors**! They: **obeyed** the law, **went** to church, **voted**, **paid** taxes, **raised** their kids with loving discipline, **valued** education...and – were – kind – to...**puppies**. **You** get the picture, right?

The **trouble** was, that their *close-to-perfect* lives **often** led them to **criticize** their neighbors for **failing** to be...more like them! For **failing** to show their faith in God by living clean, wholesome, pious lives.

So here's what happened. Some Pharisees **scold** Jesus for allowing his disciples to eat without **washing up** for dinner. Though that might

sound a little silly to **us**, those folks were taking God's Word very seriously. In fact, they could point to **chapter and verse** where it says that God wants his people to wash before eating.

Now, Jesus does **not** have a **problem** with **God's Word**, but with the Pharisees' attitude toward God's Word. They often fixated on **upholding** the lesser laws, while **ignoring** laws of greater importance.

That's why Jesus says: *It's not what goes **into** a person's mouth that makes them unclean, but the **terrible** things that can come **out** of a person's mouth* – then he names off that laundry list of bad things that we're **tempted** to do, or, at the very least, **think** about doing.

In short, Jesus **warns** the Pharisees not to judge *who's in* and *who's out*, who's clean or unclean, who's beloved and who's condemned...by their **outward actions**, but by what God sees in people's **hearts**.

So to recap this first section: the Pharisees **know** that their *law-abiding lives* are proof that they, and **only** they, are the beloved children of God – that the disciples, and Jesus by association, **cannot** be loved of God because they don't **live** the *right way*. The Pharisees see themselves as clean, chosen, blessed by God – and are sure that everyone else will be going straight to hell.

In the **next** section, we see a real reversal at work. Immediately after this fight with the Pharisees, Jesus and his disciples leave their country to spend some time at the beach in the land of Canaan. No sooner do they **arrive**, **get out** the suntan lotion, and **spread** their towels on the sand - when a Canaanite woman starts **shouting**, **pleading**, **begging** Jesus to **save** her daughter from the torment of a demon.

We know how these stories go, right? Jesus encounters some sorry soul who's suffering, takes **pity** on them and **helps** them find a sense of healing and peace in life...*or not?!?! Not right away, anyway...*

Here are some prickly points to note:

1. At first, Jesus **ignores** this woman's cries.
2. The disciples take it a step **further** and try to **hush her up**.
3. Then Jesus **refuses** to help her because she's not **Jewish**.
4. And when she persists, **he calls her a dog...**

That's not the Jesus we know.

That's not the Prince of Peace we've come to expect.

That's not the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world...

...or is it?

Help me come up with some possibilities to help us interpret Jesus' strange response to this poor, faithful woman's request for help...Anyone have an idea to share???

I can only think of two:

1. Our former bishop in Alaska, Mike Keys, describes this episode as happening during the *cranky Jesus* stage...

The closer Jesus moves toward Jerusalem and his death,

-the crankier he seems to become;

-the less light-hearted become his teachings; and

-the more pointed become his rebukes.

He's just come from a confrontation,

is on his way to the cross,

has neither the time nor the energy to do anything more than what is absolutely required.

We've all been there, right? When you just **can't** add one more thing, one more concern, one more person to your to-do list...

Maybe Jesus left the country because he needed to get away, to relax, to leave the cares of his calling behind for just a day or two – and what happens the moment he pulls into town where **nobody** should know him? This woman cries out, ***Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David...***

Did Jesus wince? Did he shake his head? Did his shoulders sag...under the cares of the world? That's one possibility...the ***cranky Jesus*** stage...

2. Another option might be called, ***the playful Jesus***... Robert Capon, one of my favorite theologians, says that Jesus' reference to this poor woman as a dog is (quote) *part of an **in** joke between himself and her...* (Kingdom, Grace, Judgement, p. 109).

In other words, from the get-go, Jesus sees in this woman a kindred spirit. He perceives in her a solid heart, a depth of trust, and a spark in her eye – so he **seizes** the opportunity to push his disciples into a **teaching** moment that ***they will never forget*** – and the fact that this story is in the bible could very well be proof of that.

If the disciples, good Jewish men, have **themselves** been accused of being unclean, then what would the Pharisees make of this foreign woman? Well, **ignoring** her, trying to **hush** her up, **refusing** to help her because she's **not Jewish** and **calling** her a **dog**...that about covers it, doesn't it? Jesus specifically tells everyone there that he's **only** come to help *the lost sheep of the house of Israel* (v. 24).

I really don't know why Jesus responds as he does...it's a mystery. But I **have** to believe that if he doesn't admire the heart and spirit of this

woman from the beginning, he certainly does by the **end** of their conversation.

Against all odds, she **perseveres** – respectfully and with hope...
 Against Jesus' **silence**,
 against the disciples' **complaint**,
 against the **Lord's** claim that he will help **only** the lost sheep of Israel,
 against Jesus' incredible **insult** – calling her a **dog**...she prevails.

Here are the four things that amaze me about this woman:

- 1) Though she's a foreigner, she **gets it** about who Jesus is: *the only person who has the power to overcome evil*...the **only** one who can save her beloved daughter.
- 2) She **praises** Jesus in ways that even the disciples haven't yet. Every time she speaks, she calls him Lord, and begins with that amazing confession, *Lord, Son of David*...
- 3) She quietly **refuses** to take **no** for an **answer**. In the face of rejection, she comes to Jesus, kneels before him and pleads, *Lord, help me*.
- 4) And to cap it all off, instead of taking **offense** at Jesus' comment about a dog, she **steals** it and **uses** it against him. *Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table*...

And here I have a picture of Jesus throwing his head back, laughing out loud, pointing at the woman and saying, ***You nailed it! You are absolutely right! Your faith is incredible! Your daughter is healed!***

Who is clean, and **who** is unclean? Who is a child of God, and whom will God ignore? Who can and cannot be considered *a lost sheep of the house of Israel*?

Jesus defends the disciples against the accusation that they are **unclean**. Then he **seizes** the moment with the **Canaanite** woman, and turns everything **upside down**. He joins, maybe even encourages the disciples as they assume the attitude of the Pharisees, saying, in effect, *Send her away, Lord – she has no claim on you...she's not clean, she's not a lost sheep of the house of Israel, she's not a child of the master!*

And what is the lesson that the disciples learn???

They learn that she **is** clean. She **is** a lost sheep of the house of Israel. She **is** a child of the Master...and because **she** is, then **so** are **you**, and **so** am **I**, and so is **every** person created by God.

As they say, if it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck...then it is...a duck. If, in Christ, we are loved by God, then we are children of God: Canaanite, Israelite, and Marshallite!! Thanks be to God. Amen.