

Proper 15 (A)

Mt 15.10-28

“What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart.” In other words, our words reveal our character; what we say reveals who we are.

We have two short little stories in our gospel lesson, but there’s quite a lot going on: lots being said, many hearts being revealed. We have some scribes and Pharisees. We have Peter and the disciples. We have this nameless Canaanite woman, desperate to help her daughter. And we have Jesus. Lots being said, many hearts being revealed.

First, we have the scribes and Pharisees. We didn’t actually hear from them directly, but the first part of our gospel is actually the second half of a conversation Jesus has with some teachers from Jerusalem who have come to him with a question: “Why do your disciples break the traditions of the elders?”

In the exchange that follows, Jesus shows the Pharisees something they don’t want to see: he shows them their question reveals their character, and their character is marked more by hypocrisy and self-righteousness than it is by integrity and holiness. So, not surprisingly, they don’t react well when Jesus uncovers their true motives; they take offense.

Next, we have Peter and the disciples. “Explain this parable to us,” says Peter, “What’s this about it being what comes *out* of one’s mouth that defiles rather than what goes *into* one’s mouth? We’ve heard it said otherwise; what you’re saying makes no sense. Help me understand this.”

Peter’s words reveal a character that is marked more by confusion and uncertainty than by discernment and faith. He had heard Jesus say something he wasn’t sure he liked, so he asks Jesus to justify himself a bit. The possibility of being defiled by what he ate or how he ate was something Peter wrestled with for years: we hear about his struggles with this issue again in the books of Acts, and again in Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Peter’s request for an explanation tells us something about his character.

We hear in Peter’s request something similar to what we heard from Peter last week: remember the story of Peter walking on the water? He gets out of the boat, but then he notices the waves, he’s overwhelmed by the strong winds, he’s confused by the storm, and he starts to sink. So he cries out, “Lord, save me!” His cry revealed his character: he wasn’t so much asking for help as he was giving voice to his lack of faith, and Jesus says as much.

In today’s gospel, however, it’s someone else asking for help: a nameless Canaanite woman. But *her* cry for help reveals something quite different about her heart: “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented.”

It’s important to remember this is a *Canaanite* woman who says this. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus observed that, of all the people of Palestine, those from Tyre were the ones

who most hated the Jews: “amongst the Phoenicians,” he wrote, “the Tyrians are notoriously our bitterest enemies” (*Against Apion* I.13). And where’s this woman from? “The district of Tyre and Sidon.”

And yet what does she call Jesus? “Lord.” “Son of David.” More so than the scribes and Pharisees, more so even than Peter and the disciples, she recognizes Jesus for who he is: God’s anointed messiah, the one appointed to restore Israel and to be a light to the nations.

Her cry for help reveals several things about her character. It reveals her willingness to acknowledge her own need. She’s not there for an explanation; she doesn’t want Jesus to justify to her satisfaction why the world is such a bad place or how a good God could allow her daughter to be tormented by a demon. She doesn’t have time for abstractions: she’s there because she needs help, and she knows it.

And she’s there because she knows the only one who can give her the kind of help she needs is this itinerant Jewish rabbi. She knows who Jesus is, and she knows who she herself is. We see this in the argument she uses to convince Jesus to help her daughter: “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.” This is not ingratiating servility. This is not false humility. This is frank self-awareness: she does not belong to the household of Israel, she’s not a member of the covenant people, she can make no claim on Jesus.

Jesus makes an appeal to justice: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” She responds by appealing to something higher than justice: she appeals to mercy. “Yes, Lord, you’re right; it *is* not fair to throw the children’s food to the dogs. But it would be a mercy to do so. Help me, please.” Her words reveal a heart that recognizes its own need, its own emptiness, and that recognizes the one who can meet her need.

And so we come to Jesus himself: what do his words reveal about his character? There’s something rather subtle going on in our gospel lesson that is easy to overlook. A superficial reading of these two stories may suggest Jesus is not entirely consistent in his speech, that his heart is somewhat divided: when he talks with the scribes and Pharisees he’s ready to set aside the traditions of the elders, but when he talks with the Canaanite woman he’s reluctant to violate the traditional line between Jews and Gentiles. But then she talks him around, and he sees the error of his ways; he grants her request in a way that brings his interaction with her into line with his interaction with the Pharisees.

There may be something to that, but that is certainly not the whole story. Behind the apparent inconsistency of what Jesus says to the scribes and Pharisees and what he says to the Canaanite woman, there lies a deeper consistency, a more profound integrity. This tacit cohesion has to do with the unswerving dedication Jesus has to the mission his Father has given him to be the one that redeems Israel. The words Jesus speaks to the scribes and the Pharisees and those he speaks to the Canaanite woman reveal a character that is singularly obedient to his Father’s will; they reveal a heart that is firmly fixed on the work God has given him to do. When we see these stories within the wider narrative arc of Matthew’s gospel, what they say about the character and identity of Jesus becomes clear: he is the one Simeon rightly named as “a light to the Gentiles and the glory of his people Israel” (Lk 2.32).

What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart; our words reveal our character. We have in today's gospel not only an object lesson about the correspondence between our language, our actions, and our identity, we also have a reminder of what real faith looks like and a reassurance about where real help is to be found.

Now, what about us? There are of course several challenges here. Ours is a culture inundated by words, languages of all kinds. From the moment we get out of bed until the time we fall back into bed at the end of the day, we're swimming in words: conversations, advertising, smartphones, advertising, PCs and tablets, advertising, television, advertising, radio, advertising, books, advertising, newspapers, advertising, magazines, advertising. Did I mention advertising?

All these words are relentless, and they are meant to be so: they are *designed* to be relentless. The more relentless they are, the less time we have to think, the faster our decisions, the more spontaneous our commitments, the more impulsive our purchases. One challenge our gospel lesson puts before us has to do with honing our ability to discern the character behind all the words we encounter every day and to be sure we listen to the right ones. In a culture overrun by words, many of them meaningless, one of the things we must learn is when to listen and when not to listen.

And there is of course another challenge here as well: what do *our* words say about *our* characters? We've all had the experience of hearing ourselves say something we'd rather not have said. I'm not talking about a simple slip of the tongue, I'm talking about those moments when we inadvertently give voice to words that reveal something about our hearts we'd rather had stayed hidden, or maybe even something we didn't fully know about ourselves, something we didn't *want* to know. We don't think of ourselves as bad people, but then we hear ourselves giving voice to the kinds of intentions Jesus warns against. We find ourselves defiled by the things we've said.

But there is another way. When we allow our faith to inform our language, we will find the opposite happening: our words will not defile, they will sanctify. We may even find ourselves unexpectedly giving voice to the gospel in ways we don't anticipate. We may find ourselves speaking a word of comfort in the midst of an uncomfortable situation. We may find ourselves called to speak a word of truth in the midst of circumstances that have been distorted by lies. We may even—this may be the most powerful word of all—we may even find ourselves able to bear witness in utter silence while those around us are swept away in a cacophony of meaningless babble.

Jesus warned his disciples they would find themselves in difficult circumstances. But he also told them, "Don't worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you at [the right] time, for it is not you who speaks but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you" (Mt 10.19-20). In today's culture, when everyone is clamoring to make sure their voice is heard and their voice is the loudest, we are called to be those whose speak words that begin in silence. We are called first to listen, to attend to the movement of God's Spirit, and to say only what is given to us to say.

So we are this day invited to reflect on the correspondence between our words and our actions,

our language and our character. And we are invited to renew our commitment to being people whose speech and whose actions are governed by the movement of God's Spirit. May it be so, this day and always, to the honor and glory of his Name. Amen.

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