

“From the Heart of the Defiled”

Matthew 15:10-28 ¹⁰ Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen and understand. ¹¹ What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean.'" ¹² Then the disciples came to him and asked, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?" ¹³ He replied, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. ¹⁴ Leave them; they are blind guides. {14 Some manuscripts guides of the blind} If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit." ¹⁵ Peter said, "Explain the parable to us." ¹⁶ "Are you still so dull?" Jesus asked them. ¹⁷ "Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? ¹⁸ But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.'" ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. ²⁰ These are what make a man 'unclean'; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him 'unclean.'" ²¹ Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. ²² A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession." ²³ Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us." ²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." ²⁵ The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said. ²⁶ He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." ²⁷ "Yes, Lord," she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸ Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

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Sacred, what does sacred mean? Similarly, what does it mean to defile something? For most of us, this sanctuary is a sacred place, a place set aside for special use by God. And, probably, the most sacred feature of this sanctuary for us is the communion table. When we use this table, the Lord's Table, we like to do so in a way respectful of what it is. We cover it with a white shroud-like tablecloth and we place upon it silver plates and a silver chalice. We use fresh bread and we fill the chalice with wine and then gathered around this table we share a holy meal, a meal shared in such a way as to bring praise to Christ Jesus. This table is sacred to us.

Well...let me see if I can push your sense of the sacred here a bit. What if instead of a white shroud-like table cloth, I use a red-checkered gingham, picnicky tablecloth? That would catch your eye I'm sure. What if instead of bread on a silver dish, I substitute a simple carton of Timbits? Let's push your sensibilities some more. What if I replace the chalice with a Tim Horton's coffee extra large double-double? I bet you say to yourselves, "this is OK for the purpose of a sermon illustration, but don't take it any further." Well, let's say I do. What if I placed the Timbits onto the silver plate; and what if I poured the coffee into the silver chalice? Would you feel your sense of the sacredness of this meal to be a bit offended? Would you feel as if I were taking things a bit too far and making something common out of this sacred meal indeed to the point that it would no longer be Holy Communion for you? It would seem as though I reduced this meal to something common, something less than sacred. (It could be worse. I could have used Starbucks or something from the McDonald's in the foyer of the Walmart.) Let me push this one step further. What if I tried to make something sacred of these items of commercialized food that are as common to our culture as was bread and fish and wine were in Jesus' day? What if I proceeded to lead you in the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving and said the words of institution over these bits of sacrilege and presented to you these doughnut holes as the body of Christ given for you and this coffee as

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the blood of Christ shed for the forgiveness of your sin? Well, I think that would do it. I would have defiled this meal. I'm pretty sure that if I were on the receiving end that I would feel offended. So, you don't have to worry about me ever doing that. Even though the Lord's Supper consists of the basic everyday elements of bread and wine, it should not be reduced to the mundane by the use of Timbits and Tim Horton's coffee. That would defile the Supper for me. It would no longer be for me the Lord's Supper. But...if Timbits and Tim Horton's coffee were all we had, no doubt, I'd use them and I think you would too.

Well, I've led you folks through this little exercise on sacred things and how to defile them to come now to this point of saying that it is one thing to talk about sacred things and places and our feelings of being offended when they are defiled and an entirely different thing when the same discussion is had with respect to persons. All people - no matter their race, ethnic background, social class, religion, or nationality – all people are sacred. All people are sacred because together we all share God's purpose of bearing the image of God in his creation in our relationships with each other and with the creation. The image of God is really quite beautiful; a loving communion of persons giving themselves to one another so selflessly that their love cannot be contained and must spill forth and enliven all things. But, unfortunately, the beautiful image of God that God created us to share in and reflect forth to the entire cosmos has been defiled by us, by our sin – by humanity's urge to be gods rather than simply and joyfully bearing the image of the Trinity – the loving communion of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Every human being is sacred, but like a communion chalice filled with Tim Horton's coffee we are defiled in our hearts and that defilement spills forth making everything we do common rather than sacred, serving our own purposes rather than God's. This is so even when our intentions are good. There is nothing we can do that is not in some way self-serving rather than Christ-serving even when we are carrying out what we are called by God to do. Ask any minister what it is like to preach. No matter how much we would like it to be otherwise, there is no way we can ever separate ourselves from our own big-mouthed big-headedness every time we stand in the pulpit. Even if the Holy Spirit gave us the exact words to say our selfish sense of self would still be there. So, there's no point in looking at ministers as if we are more holy than anyone else. All people are sacred, yet we have all defiled ourselves, been defiled, and defiled others.

Well, stepping into Matthew here, if there is one lesson this Canaanite woman from Matthew's Gospel can give to us, it is precisely that God regards all people as sacred. There is no one too defiled or unclean whom Jesus won't regard as an equal. There is a prejudice lingering around in the background of this story and Jesus' initial silence towards this woman highlights it. It is prejudice against the defiled. In Jesus' day this prejudice exhibited itself in the distinction between Jew and Gentile. The Jews believed themselves to be the holy ones, those set apart for God's special purpose and use in the world. After all, God had called them his own people. It was to them that he had given the Law. God had established a special relationship with Israel. The Gentiles, on the other hand, were in the eyes of religious Israel were just common, unholy, not worthy to come before God and God would never use them for his special purpose.

To the astonishment of all the religious bigots in this passage Jesus has actually gone outside of the borders of Israel into Gentile country. He's left the Holy Land and there this Canaanite woman worships him and begs him for help. If you remember your Old Testament, Canaanite women were always leading the Israelites astray into idol worship through seducing Israelite men into marriage. The ironic thing here is that this Canaanite woman is doing what the religious authorities and even Jesus' disciples won't do. She worships and prays to him. She bows before him, calls him Lord, and says help me, all the while knowing that she doesn't deserve it and has no right in any way to ask. The only right she could have

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to do such a thing was for Jesus to simply extend mercy to her, show her favour, by speaking to her. Interestingly, the Greek word we translate here as help is only used in reference with asking a god for help. This Canaanite woman recognized that Jesus was in some way God and the only hope for her daughter's deliverance was him showing her mercy. His disciples wanted to send her away because she was an unclean her calling after them was bringing shame to Jesus and to them. Jesus remains uncomfortably silent towards her there, I think, to highlight to his disciples' prejudice and to make them notice that this Gentile woman was seeing in him what they were having difficulty seeing and what the religious authorities could not see at all – Jesus is the Lord and we each need his help.

In Matthew's gospel this Canaanite woman stands in immediate contrast to Peter and the walking on water incident and also to the religious authorities who have been so blinded by their own hypocrisy that the only thing they can say to Jesus is, “Why do your disciples eat with unwashed hands?” Peter is pretty indicative of those who follow Jesus. We spend most of our time just sitting in the boat and we very boldly say to a distant and ghost-like Jesus, “Lord, command us to do something really fantastic that will get us out of this boat.” and then, surprisingly he does and we give it a shot only to cower away from the task when we realize we're beyond our ability to control things. The religious authorities are more concerned about their power and image than they are about what is really going on in their hearts. They cannot admit that they are full of Tim Horton's (extra large, double-double) rather than the cherished wine of the Passover. To them Tim Horton's tasted the same as Manischewits. (Bill might be the only one who got that one.) But, this Canaanite woman got it – she knew her need before God, who her Lord is, and what her only hope could be and simply threw herself at his feet and prayed for help. That's worship in its purist form.

This prejudice lingers about today as well but in a different form. It exhibits itself when we look at others, particularly those who are less well off than we are, as people in need of a ministry that we think we've been specially called by God to offer because we are the Church. We see their need all the while ignoring the condition of our own hearts and our being too foolishly proud to admit that we too have need. Allow me to speak candidly here. The three most Spirit-filled experiences of worship that I have had since coming to Canada have been the three worship services we have had down at Evangel Hall after serving the dinner. The folks down there are outcasts. We look at them and because we know that all people are sacred we do our best to regard them as our equals. But...when we're done we come home to our comfortable Caledon homes counting our blessings. The only times we worship like this Canaanite woman and cry out to Christ Jesus our Lord for help is if something threatens our lives or our sense of security and then like Peter we squeal “Lord, save me.” Even though we call ourselves his disciples we rather look at Jesus as if he were a distant ghost who walks on water and the only way we'd get out of the safe little boat of the way we do our sacred things is by his command. Let's think about our congregation here for a moment. The greatest hindrance we face is our location. What would it take to get us to actually go, indeed move, to where there are actually people around us...a specific command from Jesus, right? To speak quite frankly, there is also a side to us that looks at this place as sacred space and we feel we need to be careful what we let happen in here as to not defile it, yet, all the while forgetting that God the Son took upon himself sinful flesh and defiled himself by touching and letting himself be touched by defiled people and he even suffered the defilement of death. Quite honestly we do have in ourselves that streak of hypocrisy called religious authority that dulls our ears to hear Christ's call to us.

But, the folks down at Evangel Hall in that worship service, they just throw themselves at the feet of the Lord in worship begging for help. Speaking for myself, they are to this disciple of Jesus Christ what that Canaanite woman was to the twelve. Standing before them

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in those worship services I feel my own personal prejudices and hypocrisies standing exposed. Even so, there's something really special that happens inside of me (and it also happens when I lead worship in the nursing homes) I feel as if I've just walked on water, like I shared a morsel of bread fallen to the floor from the master's table. The feeling is so restfully disquieting that I hunger inside myself with a longing that when my call is fulfilled here at Claude that the Lord doesn't send me to another church, but rather among people such as those. But, that is years down the road and we've work to do together.

Well, I'm not sure how to end this sermon. My rambling has taken us far a field. I want you each to know that you are sacred. There is nothing that separates you from the love of God...bask in it and let it spill forth from you. I also want to say that our purpose is not to protect the things we call sacred from defilement. That is not our duty before God. Nor is our duty to sit timidly in the boat pretending to be a safe haven among the waves while waiting for a command to some fantastic ministry. If we do that Jesus will sneak up on us, walking to us like a far off ghost that we can't quite recognize, and scaring us into taking him and his ministry seriously. We are those whom God has encumbered with the task of letting his image spill forth through us because we've been given the Holy Spirit. This task truly does require that we get out of the boat and go to where people are and letting them know that they are sacred to God by the way we regard them. We are a congregation who sincerely love one another and that is a gift from God. Yet, this gift is one we are meant to share and this means we each must rearrange our lives so that church isn't just a safe haven where we find rest for ourselves and go to the Canaanites that everywhere surround us and announce to them that they are sacred. Amen.