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A Matter of the Heart

Genesis 45: 1-15; Matthew 15:10-28

I never think of Jesus as being crude and insensitive, but part of today's passage comes across that way. Jesus' conclusive comment the "first day on the job" in the synagogue of his hometown became a self-fulfilling prophecy: "A prophet is not without honor except in his own country...." His teachings on that first day were discounted and he left with that gospel writer noting: "And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. (Mark 6:5)

It seems that throughout those three, short years of ministry, the Scribes and Pharisees dogged him at every turn. Many of the questions he answered were not "straight up" questions. You have to be careful how authoritatively you use those answers. Few, if any, of his answers are ones to well-intended questions. For example, the question posed about which of seven brothers married successively to a certain woman would be the true husband in heaven, was asked by a Sadducee. Sadducees didn't believe in an afterlife; Pharisees did. So, the real question was "how *can* there be an afterlife when our rules for marriage on earth won't fit in to a heavenly situation?" On another occasion, his open-air classroom was interrupted when a woman was thrown before him. She, supposedly, had been caught in the act of adultery and Jesus was asked what should be done with her. If he didn't say, "stone her," he would be in trouble with the Jewish authorities for failing to uphold the Jewish law of stoning an adulterous woman. If he did say, "stone her," he would be in trouble with Roman authorities for suggesting action that was contrary to the law of a Roman province. What John records him doing was saying, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." Then he stooped in silence and began doodling in the dirt with a stick. Some have speculated that he was buying time for their conscience to "kick in." Some have suggested that he began to write the names of her accusers who had also slept with her...which caused them to quietly drop their

stones and slip away. Some females I know, including my wife, have suggested that he scratched in the sand: "Where's the man?"

His own people just wouldn't give him a chance. It's tough having a medical degree and years of experience treating patients, but no green card. So you gratefully file nails or haul pine straw to make a living in your new country. It's challenging to have a teaching certificate and years of experience, but only a handful of students with a tepid desire to learn. It must have been taxing to be Jesus, coming with powers from his Abba to save his own people, and to have been treated like a quack.

In the middle of Matthew's anthology of Jesus' miracles, we read that the Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus and asked him why his disciples were breaking the Jewish tradition of not washing their hands before eating. We aren't talking about personal hygiene; we're talking about a religious ritual. He gave them a curt answer and elaborated on it later with his disciples. That discussion produced a phrase that we hear 2,000 years later in everyday conversation: "The blind leading the blind." When Peter asked him to elaborate on what he said to the scribes and Pharisees, his answer became almost bathroom language. Jesus was obviously incensed by his own religious leaders accusing him of "not being very spiritual."

It was after being regularly rejected by his own kind, and being criticized for his followers not having better religious manners that the Canaanite woman came out shouting to him to "have mercy on her and help her daughter who was having emotional problems." "A prophet is not without honor *except with his own people,*" he must have thought again. Before he could respond to her appeal, his disciples spoke for him. "Send her away. She's getting on our nerves. You don't need to be bothered by her now."

Who knows but what he had seen her face among the crowds on one of those humiliating encounters. So, he responded as some of the self-righteous leaders might have crudely and insensitively responded. Facetiously using one of their well-worn phrases he said, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Most Hebrews despised Canaanites.

Staying connected to him and playing his verbal game she said, “Yes, but even the dogs get the crumbs from under the master’s table.”

“Woman, if only my own people had your insight and faith. May your daughter be healed”

Rules, regulations, and traditions play an important role in the life of any civilization or group. But, there’s a point at which tradition for tradition sake, rules for the sake of rules become destructive. Ask the “fiddler on the roof” who symbolized tradition. Ask the innocent Jews and Palestinians in Israel, Gaza Strip or the West Bank. Ask almost any world onlooker. “An eye for an eye,” and “a tooth for a tooth” is never going solve any war.

When I read the Genesis passage early last week in preparation for today’s sermon, I was struck with the tenderness of Joseph’s reception to his brothers: “And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it.” Years earlier, Joseph’s brothers had sold him to a caravan of gypsies, who in turn sold him as a slave to the Egyptians. Amazingly, he had proven himself worthy and honorable and had attained the level of the second highest-ranking ruler of Egypt. When famine hit the land, Jacob’s other sons came to Egypt to bargain for food. Unknown to them, the person who was to grant or decline their request was their long lost brother, betrayed by them. Within Joseph’s power were the options to imprison them, have them killed, send them away, simply sell them food, or forgive and receive them as his family.

Obviously, he had forgiven them long ago. For the sake of his own life, he had gotten rid of the bitterness and resentment. How else could he have had such a healthy and successful career otherwise? Abraham Lincoln once said: “The easiest way to defeat an enemy is to turn him into a friend.”

But listen to the tenderness. After asking his staff to give him privacy with these men from the north bargaining for grain, Joseph was overpowered with emotion at the prospect of reconciling his relationship with his family. His weeping was so loud and out of control that his staff and Pharaoh’s staff could hear moaning and broken speech, sobbing and painful laughter.

It's what's in the heart that makes or breaks a person...a church...a community...a nation. Rules come and go. The Book of Order is amended now every other year. Traditions change with time. A new President is elected every four years. But sometimes you only have one chance to give your heart away. Sometimes, mothers only have one shot at getting the help they need for their child, and the outcome lies in your response.

The rituals we go through are not what make us spiritual. They are there to help us, as long as they remain a means to an end, rather than becoming an end in themselves. Traditions exist to enhance our lives, as long they reinforce the truth. What's the country and western line? "A little less talk and a lot more action?" I think that's the point Jesus was trying to make. And it's a point worth making on most any day. Amen.

Genesis 45:1-15

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ²And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. ³Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. ⁴Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. ⁷God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. ⁹Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. ¹⁰You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. ¹¹I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.' ¹²And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. ¹³You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." ¹⁴Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. ¹⁵And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Matthew 15:10-28

¹⁰Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: ¹¹it

is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.”¹² Then the disciples approached and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?”¹³ He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted.”¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.”¹⁵ But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.”¹⁶ Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding?¹⁷ Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.”²⁰ These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.”²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.”²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.”²⁶ He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”²⁷ She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.