

*The following sermon was given on the Twentieth Sunday of Ordinary Time, August 17, 2014 by Pastor Joel Krueger. It is based on the gospel lesson for that Sunday, Matthew 15:10-28 and is entitled, "You Aren't What You Eat" and speaks to the need for us to know and live out God's mercy.*

Here in Matthew, we once again have Jesus at odds with the Pharisees, one of the parties within the religious establishment. They had just asked him why his disciples transgress the tradition of the elders by not washing their hands when they eat and his response to them is "Why do you transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?" He points to their rules that encourage or reward people to make contributions to the Temple that should rightly go to support their parents, thereby countering the commandment of God to honor your father and your mother. So the setting we have here has something to do with traditions or accepted cultural practices.

Then he assails another tradition, the very important dietary rules that dictate what a person can eat and what they cannot eat. These were not deemed important merely for health reasons but they could be used to determine whether a person was acceptable to God, whether the person was clean or unclean, whether they were pure or defiled. Jesus challenges this belief and says *"It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles it."* He then explains to his disciples that it is not what you eat that makes any difference as to what kind of person you are. For food just passes through you.

However, the things that come out of your mouth, the words you say, those things originate in the heart and it is this that makes the difference as to what kind of person you are. And it is not only what you say but what you do, how you act and behave, those things also proceed from the heart and speak enormously about who you are and what kind of person you are. And, by the way, where you stand in relationship with God. Do you speak and act as if God does not exist and defile yourself before God? Or do you acknowledge the presence

of that which desires only good for you and all creation and thereby seek to live within God's mercy?

Mercy. Also translated as *God's loving kindness*, mercy and acceptance seem to be a major concern in Jesus' dealings with the Pharisees. Twice, in previous discussions with them, Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6 to them: *"I desire mercy, not sacrifice."* We see it at chapter 9:13 where the Pharisees ask why he eats with tax collectors and sinners, and again at 12:7 where the Pharisees complain about the disciples plucking grain to eat on the Sabbath. *"I desire mercy, not sacrifice."* Mercy is at the heart of Jesus' message and the cornerstone of his critique of their religion and lifestyle which seems more concerned about obedience to religious rules and traditions than about the heart of the people.

So this next section in Matthew's passage is really interesting. Jesus and the gang have gone out of Jewish territory, to Tyre and Sidon. Remember, Jesus has been tirelessly ministering to the people, has not been able to find a place or time to get away by himself for very long and so he is exhausted, tired, in need of rest. And we can't know for sure but perhaps this is why he reacts the way he does when the Canaanite woman comes shouting at him, *"Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon!"*

But he ignores her. Says nothing to her. His disciples are bothered by her. One commentator suggests Jesus and the disciples are on a kind of men's retreat. And here is this woman, this loud, obnoxious woman, breaking in and disturbing their time together! The guys want her to go away and they tell Jesus to just send her packing. But Jesus can't do it. He has to at least address her and he tells her that he was sent only to the *lost sheep of the house of Israel*. Perhaps a reference to Jews living in