

Pentecost X (August 9, 2020) Text: Matthew 15:10-28; Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

“Who Gets In?”

“Happiness is a warm puppy,” cartoonist Charles Shultz reminded us in his best-selling book of 1962. That may be very true (can anything be “very” true?) . . . that may be true in our culture; but in other cultures the warmth of a puppy is not a source for happiness or any other positive emotion. In Arab cultures, dogs are equated with the devil, and are viewed as ritually unclean. While not quite so universal today, many in Judaism hold a similar view.

In Jesus’ time, dogs were regarded as unclean, demonic, and dangerous (maybe because so few had been domesticated; we hear nothing, for example, of dogs being used for herding or even hunting). In fact, if you wanted to insult someone powerfully, there could be fewer denigrating phrases you could lob at him or her than to call him or her “a dog” (okay, maybe “infidel dog” was worse).

It is surprising — no, it is shocking, disruptive, and unthinkable — that our Lord should look at the Canaanite woman who stands before Him in our Gospel for this day and refer to her as “a dog.” Now, you can, I realize, jump to His defense and say that He doesn’t exactly call her a dog; He merely implies it. We’ll come back in a moment to why that defense is so telling in this circumstance.

Jesus says this to a woman who has come to Him with a problem — a serious, life-wrenching problem: her daughter is being tormented by a demon. Every other time Jesus is so confronted with a plea for such help, His reply and response is both loving and helpful. To this woman, however, He says, ***“It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”*** Every time I read this narrative I wince at these words from Jesus.

What is going on here? The context would tell us that Jesus is testing her. Maybe so . . . nonetheless, couldn’t such testing have taken place without the derogatory invective?

Some would argue that Jesus was simply expressing to this woman what the culture of His day would say was her “place”: she had no right to ask of Him anything — that He wanted her to understand what a huge benefice she was seeking from Him. Some commentators just ignore the whole thing, except to acknowledge how that culture despised (and I do use that in its fundamental meaning!) her. Why? Because, in the book of Genesis, Noah utters this curse:

***“Cursed be Canaan;
lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers.
Blessed by the LORD my God be Shem
and let Canaan be his slave.
May God make space for Japheth,
and let him live in the tents of Shem;
and let Canaan be his slave.”*** (9:25-26)

Add to that the instructions when the Israelites returned from Egyptian bondage; they were told they were to annihilate the Canaanites (of which Joshua made a worthwhile initial effort, but did not complete the task), and you might begin to see why there was enmity between Jews and Canaanites — you also have an insight into why things in that part of the world are so antagonistic today: nobody ever forgets anything. Except forgiveness! You can forget that!

But that still doesn't explain Jesus' treatment of this woman. Here's what I think is going on (and I admit, this is pure conjecture on my part, but apparently, after reading several commentators on this text, I seem to be the one this bothers):

I think Jesus is using the cultural norms of His day. I think in so using them, He exposes them for the hateful, damaging attitudes they are. Today, many people think nothing of using words that hurt, belittle, demean, or ostracize others — until somebody to whom that nasty word applies is standing right in front of the one mouthing off. Words have power. Unfortunately, that power is way too often employed destructively.

Look at the context of this narrative: The woman approaches Jesus; He does not respond at all. Didn't He hear her? Was He occupied with someone else? The disciples hear her, and they have a response: "*Get rid of her!*" (It is amazing how many times in the Gospels the disciples are portrayed as uncaring or, as often, boundary-setting).

Now, there are good boundaries; we all need them. When someone wants to invade your space, you get to set a boundary for safe distance. When someone wants to invade your privacy (like asking about your sex life), you have every reason to establish your right not to reply to that! There are lots and lots of people who think that, if you have invited them into your living room, that gives them the right to go through your medicine cabinet and your bedroom closets.

Cultural anthropologist Paul Hiebert was the first to describe what he called bounded-set and centered-set cultures, societies, and groups. Jesus is operating in a bounded-set environment, which means that rules are more important than people, because rules define how one is part of the group. Jesus models a centered-set concept, where people come first and rules (or behaviors) are viewed in terms of how they meet people's needs. I think that Jesus is showing what happens when rules-bounded groups come face-to-face with someone who is not "in" the group — the immediate impulse is to keep them away from, and out of, the group.

But this woman won't play that game (good for her!); she takes the rules and sees to it that they get twisted away from this exclusionary impact: "***Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs*** [could she have made that "us dogs"] ***eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.***"

Why does this matter? Two things:

The First Lesson today carried these words of Yahweh through His prophet, Isaiah: "***my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the LORD GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.***" Part of the covenant with Abraham included the promise: "***by you shall all the***

nations of the earth be blessed.” (Genesis 22.18)

This is why Israel was chosen: to make this come true. Unfortunately, throughout its history, Israel ignored that part of the covenant. There was great delight (even arrogance!) at being “the chosen.” But “chosen” for what? That was conveniently pushed off to the side.

When Jesus announces in today’s Gospel, ***“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,”*** He does not merely express a mission to seek out those who wandered away from the fold, but to the fold itself that has gotten lost in its sense of mission. The Pharisees were especially good at this, but they were by no means alone in this: most Jews saw themselves as “in” and everybody else as “out.” How was that determined? By the rules. Keep the rules, you’re “in.” Break a rule, forget a rule, fudge even a little on a rule . . . oh-oh!

How is that today? Many church groups, denominations, congregations, and groups within congregations are established on the basis of belief systems and behaviors . . . in other words: rules.

Do we get rid of rules? No, we interpret people beyond just the rules.

Here’s what can (and often does) happen when rules are paramount (true story). Rick was a pastor in a denomination that was very big on speaking in tongues. In fact, speaking in tongues was the primary attribute one had to have in order to be a pastor in that denomination. Rick had never had the experience. By every other measure, he was qualified to be a pastor: compassionate, theologically astute, capable teacher and preacher, wonderful leader — he just couldn’t seem to find the gift of speaking in tongues. So . . . he memorized the names of all the Iroquois nations and when it was time to speak in tongues, he would pronounce those.

Sometimes, rules just aren’t the right tools for dealing with people. Jesus engaged this Canaanite woman with the rule: ***“Don’t feed the dogs.”*** The woman agreed with the rule. ***“Good rule, Jesus,”*** she implies, ***“BUT, within the rules, even dogs get the scraps.”*** At that Jesus affirms her: ***“Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”***

What was so great about her faith? Faith is what we have to rely on when we no longer have the rules to protect us. Rules often set up barriers, obstacles, and fences — and Robert Frost may think that “*good fences make good neighbors*” (and there’s that necessary boundaries idea coming into play), but fences can also divide, exclude, and reject others.

I said earlier that I would come back to the idea of the importance of saying that Jesus merely implies the Canaanite woman is a dog, and does not say that to her directly . . . I’m back to it now.

All too often, we erect fences and barriers that we are not even aware are there. We assume that everyone should be “like us” and when they are not, our first impulse is to distance ourselves from them. You’ve likely see the poster (and/or T-shirt) which depicts a pair of footprints facing a set of three footprints with the caption, “*I like you. You’re different!*” Many of us would like to believe that defines us: open to all the different people in the world. Really? Look around. How diverse are we, gathered on this day in this place? Does that matter? I think it does.

I believe we need to set for ourselves the concept that rules are not faith-compatible. Rules do not enhance or establish relationships; only love does that. So what do we do? Throw out all the rules? You may not be aware of it, but our constitution and by-laws hold that Robert’s Rules of Order shall be the guide for our congregational meetings. When was the last time you heard, read, or followed an article of Robert’s Rules of Order? You know when you break out Robert’s Rules of Order? When you’ve messed things up so badly that you’ve twisted yourselves into a knot and you can’t seem to find a way out. Otherwise keep that volume on the bookshelf and deal with one another in love and dignity and things will run very smoothly.

A similar principle applies to how to engage the world, especially those in the world who differ from us. Forget trying to make them conform to “the rules” and just love the heck out of them. So they act differently; there’s no rule against that, unless you define one. So they think differently; there’s no rule against that, unless you develop one. So they

dress differently; there's no rule against that, although I have to admit that my own aesthetics sometimes would like to dictate several.

This, by the way, is what Jesus is speaking to when He speaks of what goes in and what comes out of people. Sure, He is specifically addressing the rules imposed by the Levitical dietary codes, often used by His opponents as ways of demonstrating their own perfection and everyone else's second-class status. But we need to hear it beyond that: what defiles is not some infraction of the rules; it is how we treat, and especially how we use language to treat, others. Too often, we use language to divide; and all too often that kind of division happens because we choose to say nothing at all.

Perhaps this little verse from Edwin Markham can serve to sum up what Jesus is telling us.

*“He drew a circle that shut me out —
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in.”*

What kind of circle will you draw this week?

Amen.