

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8 Matthew 15:10-28; Pentecost 11A; 8/16/20
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Last Monday morning, my friend, Bill Uetricht, and I were discussing today's readings. He suggested that Richard Rohr's daily meditations over the past few days connect to these readings. Lately, Rohr has been discussing the fact that we grow in thinking, maturity, understanding, and in our faith by "passing beyond some perceived perfect *Order*, through an often painful and seemingly unnecessary *Disorder*, to an enlightened *Reorder* or resurrection. This is the universal pattern that connects and solidifies our relationships with everything around us.... To grow toward love, union, salvation, or enlightenment, we must be moved from Order to Disorder and then ultimately to Reorder."

As I continued to study these lessons, I believe Bill hit the nail on the head. So often, religious communities attempt to create and place themselves in these containers or boxes, placing perimeters around themselves. Such efforts help to create a highly defined sense of order but, they also establish communities intently focused on tradition and exclusivity with troubling exclusionary practices. In today's reading from Isaiah, the people have returned to Jerusalem from Babylonian exile, and they are attempting to reorganize, both as a religion and as a society. So, they create a narrowly defined sense of order by excluding foreigners and

outsiders and establishing strict boundaries. The prophet disrupts this by proclaiming God's vision of community which **includes** outsiders! He says those previously excluded from the covenant may now belong because all may fit under God's umbrella! Isaiah's words lead the people to reorder their understanding of divine mercy and God's welcome for **all** people.

Then, in today's gospel reading, Jesus is speaking to the religious community about the rigid order created by an intent focus on tradition and conventional religious practices. He is speaking to **all** who hold tradition and ritual in high esteem and consider themselves to be the "in crowd" – the socially accepted crowd. The community was preoccupied with dietary laws about what would defile and hurt the body, laws that dictated what could and could not be touched or eaten. Jesus confronted the people about their exclusionary practices, their clean and unclean requirements and, he turned conventional thinking on its head. He challenges the people regarding the importance of their strict dietary laws that place a high premium on the purity of the individual. You see, Jesus is much more concerned about the heart and the stuff that comes **out** of us as we live in relationship to others. He is concerned about the stuff that can defile, the stuff that comes out that **hurts others and hurts the world**. Theologian, Dock Hollingsworth, describes what Jesus is saying in this way:

Yesterday's lunch is gone forever. Jesus asks, "Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes into the sewer?" It is a crude image. The sewer has carried away any mistakes we may have made by putting into our body things that the dietary laws call unclean. However, the careless words, the evil, the lies, and the fornication continue to be harmful. Our words and actions have the power to defile and hurt and the pain of those choices is **not** washed down the sewer like yesterday's lunch (p. 357, Feasting on the Word).

Jesus confronts the people about their exclusionary practices, disrupts their highly defined sense of order, and creates a kind of disorder by turning conventional religious thought on its head. And, I think he turns much of our conventional religious thought on its head as well.

Throughout history there have been many times when the church has used tradition in perverse, even exclusionary ways. Considering Jesus' words to us today, we should ask ourselves, what practices do we hold dear? What really does not matter? What traditions do we deem so vitally important they end up excluding others? How might we need to grow and live into a reordering of the way we do things? Jesus' words remind us that religious faithfulness is ultimately shown by the way we speak and live out the radical hospitality and love of Christ as we live in relationship to others.

What is so captivating about today's reading is that Jesus challenges and disturbs the religious community about the order of their "clean" and "unclean" status, and then finds himself in a position where the tables are

turned and **he** is confronted by a clean/unclean issue that draws **him** into a new order, a reordering of his mission and ministry.

Jesus travels into Gentile territory and is approached by a very bold, in your face Canaanite woman. She is a foreigner, and religious tradition labels her unclean. She confronts Jesus, asking him to heal her demon possessed daughter. And, Jesus' actions and words to her seem arrogant, downright racist, and just plain mean. First, he ignores her and then he insults her by using an ethnic slur, calling her a dog. I do not like this side of Jesus! His words are degrading. Yet, I think we need to wrestle with this story. There is nothing we can or should do to water it down except honestly face Jesus' response. Is it just possible that we see a greater glimpse of Jesus' humanity in this story? I think that for most of us, we say we believe Jesus was "truly human" but, we do not want him to be **too** human. The fact of the matter is the gospel writer does not clean up this story. Instead, he shows us a very human side of Jesus. Pastor Gary Charles, when describing this scene writes:

Jesus enters into "unwashed" territory of untouchable foreigners, a despised "toxic waste area." Jewish religious tradition had "proven to be a 'holy' fence" for these foreigners, keeping them on the outside. And, not only is this woman an unclean foreigner, she is doubly despised because she is a woman.

Jesus' initial actions and disturbing words to this bold woman are descriptive of the defined order of conventional religious thinking within the Jewish community of that time. So, does Jesus respond out of his humanity and the ordered socialization he has experienced throughout his thirty some years of life? Can we see him as fully human in his response? Is he so fully human that this very bold woman who approaches him and is **not** willing to back down creates a sense of disorder for Jesus, and **changes him?** Is the Jesus in whom we believe so fully human that this woman changes Jesus' **own** thinking and understanding of his ministry in this world, enabling him to expand his understanding of God's call and then reorder his mission? Many scholars think this to be the case. Furthermore, the writer of Matthew's gospel is telling the Jesus story to a Jewish community that wanted to **exclude** foreigners and Gentiles, all those they considered "other." It is quite likely the audience Matthew's Jesus is addressing had some growing up to do and the story of this bold, in your face, unclean, foreign woman enabled that.

This courageous woman, an enemy of Israel, who is not willing to give up and go away, has faith - **great faith**. **She** ministers to Jesus and, in doing so, becomes **a voice from beyond the boundaries**. Jesus recognizes her faith, and her bold action is instrumental in bringing about

divine healing and the release of God's grace for the "others" in this world. And, from this time forth in Matthew's gospel, Jesus' mission expands to the point that, at the end of the gospel, it includes the **whole** world.

We who make up the body of Christ need to always be struggling with the questions we discover in today's readings. We must ask:

- What does it mean for us to follow Jesus into the "toxic waste areas" of the world, let go of our sense of defined order and be changed?
- What does it mean for us as we address the evil of racism we find in systems and structures of every form within our country and within ourselves?
- What does it mean for us to fret less about traditions and the way "we have always done things," and listen more to the cries of those tradition considers "unclean" or "unwanted"?
- How have we let our "traditions," our rules and sense of highly defined order become barriers, blocking access to the overwhelming grace of God?

Jesus was changed that day! From that point on, his mission increasingly challenged and disrupted the present order as he created a new order. And, through him, God's grace is ever becoming more fully realized in this world as we live into that new order, God's new creation.

The promises of God are true, and God's mercy is for **all people**. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, we discover God deeply loves this **entire** world. And, God is all about the business of drawing us into the reordering of God's new creation, God's dream for the world.