

**August 16, 2020**

We all like a good surprise, don't we? Our gospel reading has a lot of surprises...

We have two stories, a teaching in the form of a parable, and a healing story. They don't appear to be very similar, but they are remarkable contrasts with one another.

Jesus offers a short lesson on what defiles us... He says it's not about what goes into the mouth that defiles, but rather what comes out of the mouth that defiles.

Jesus recites a long list of icky things and ends with false witness and slander; eighth commandment stuff.

The Pharisees realize Jesus is challenging the law of Moses, and they're offended.

The disciples are uncomfortable; they pull Jesus aside and ask, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" The disciples are concerned; they're saying, "these are good religious people, these are not the people you should be offending."

And surprisingly, Jesus pushes back and says that they are just the blind leaders of the blind. Uffda... Throughout all four gospels, Jesus is consistent in his critique of judgmental people; especially and particularly the religious ones.

Now, contrast this interaction with how the disciples' interacted with the Canaanite woman. While the disciples are worried about offending the Pharisees. When it comes to the Canaanite woman, the disciples could care less, they want Jesus to dismiss her quickly and be done with her.

And Jesus does... with some rather startling and surprising language. Jesus says, and I quote... "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Talk about an uffda! Jesus is judging her, her family, her community, her whole culture as not being good enough to receive God's blessings.

Frankly, it is shocking for us to imagine Jesus ever saying anything like that! And I'll be honest; I'm a little scandalized that Jesus would say that... Imagine how the poor Canaanite woman felt...

And another contrast, the Pharisees' do not repent, to them Jesus continues to be a dangerous outsider. Now with the Canaanite woman, when she should be absolutely offended, she responds to Jesus by saying that "even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

She responds with humility, grace and persistence. And surprisingly, Jesus repents with an exclamation that "Great is your faith." This is the only place in the gospels where any body's faith is described as great.

When we compare these two stories, we see that the Pharisees' are the blind leaders of the blind, and the Canaanite woman is the one with the great faith... truly remarkable... Just the opposite of what you would think. Faith is surprising isn't it?

And I have to wonder about the demon that was tormenting the daughter. Do you suppose it could be a demon related to poor self-esteem; perhaps a demon of shame? Of course, we don't know and just speculating, but when you live on the outside of a social group, sometimes you internalize the messages that you hear.

For instance, can you imagine how the Canaanite woman felt when she was called a dog? Can you imagine how the daughter might have felt, if she heard it?

We want to believe that sticks and stones can break my bones but names will never hurt me. Unfortunately, that little rhyme is absolutely wrong. Like slow and steady erosion, hurtful names injure people tremendously.

We callously contribute to the demons of others when we talk about them behind their back; when we laugh at their ideas; when we mock them; when we call them names; and perhaps as innocently as rolling our eyes at the mention of a name.

False witness and slander is also double-edged sword. Because, without being aware of what is happening, we actually become what we resent and dislike in others. The evil that we profess to be in others, becomes the evil incarnated in ourselves.

When we bear false witness against our neighbor, we imprison them, and at the same time we also imprison ourselves. I can be so judgmental of judgmental people; do you see how that works?

We are entering a new political season. We will be seeing all kinds of television ads doing exactly all this name calling, mocking, scandalizing, belittling, all the stuff of negative campaigning.

As much as the candidates pretend, they're above that sort of thing, they all do it. They return evil for evil, and it's a spiral exercise in verbal violence... And we seem to be in bondage to it... Some people seem to love it, they get some kind of emotional high out of it...

This year, pay attention to how you feel when you see the various political ads. Do you love it when your candidate makes a hit? Or, do you get tied up in knots? Do you fear the world will come to an end if a certain candidate wins? This is real stuff. We all know the insidious contours of this demon. Whenever we start pointing our fingers at others, we begin a spiral of returning evil for evil.

Now, what is it about this **Canaanites woman's Great faith** that surprises Jesus? Does she return evil for evil? No, she doesn't. Is she persistent? Absolutely!

Does she have courage and hope? Yes she does. Faith is a mixture of all these things as well as many other things.

I'm reminded of a line I read many years ago.... "Being a Christian is not about increasing our faith, instead it is about using the faith that God gives us." Christian faith is about professing a God who fills us with hope, and living persistently and expectantly into that world and Kingdom for which we hope; a Kingdom of love, forgiveness, reconciliation, inclusion and belonging.

I see faith in every little act of kindness, forgiveness, graciousness. I see faith in generosity and compassion. We experience faith at Cross of Christ and Cannon River, like it's in the air we breathe. Whenever I see people who are different from one another, working together, I see great faith in action.

Where does this stuff of faith come from? Quite simply—Faith comes from God. It comes when we least expect it, it changes everything, and it surprises us.

The good news today is that we are justified by grace through faith. This Christian faith is for everyone: Canaanite women, Pharisees, Lutherans, Catholics, Republicans, Democrats, Swedes, even a few Dutchmen. The Kingdom is about including, reconciling and belonging; and that maybe the most surprising miracle of all. Amen.