

Often when reading a book you will find an introductory section, sometimes called a prologue. This sermon is going to have one of those. Although not part of the lectionary reading as it is listed in parenthesis, Matthew 15: 10-20 is a passage we cannot hear too often. It comes just before the encounter that Jesus has with the Canaanite woman found in Matthew 15: 21-28. These first verses refer to an incident where the Pharisees come to Jesus and complain that his disciples have eaten without washing their hands. Their complaint is not based on concerns of health and hygiene but on failure to conform to a purity ritual. Jesus tells the crowd around him "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles" (v. 11). The disciples report that the Pharisees are offended by this response. Later Jesus adds this: "Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile." In our society today we seem to have trouble understanding what matters---we fail to see that words do indeed matter—when we hear and see words of hatred—words which disrespect others—words of prejudice—we need to understand that they are real expressions of things residing in the hearts and minds of those who express them. We need to understand that these words translate into actions toward others. We need to understand that our silence in the face of these words matters as well. It implies that we do not have other words to say—words of love—words of acceptance of others as God's children—words which affirm what we know of God's love. Our silence in speaking the words of our faith gives value to those whose words oppose all that our faith tells us about God and God's desire for humanity to live in love and community with one another. And that final thought isn't so far from what we find in our official text from Matthew's gospel. As Jesus finishes talking about what defiles a person, he leaves "that place". That place seems to have been Gen-nes'a-ret, a village like Capernaum on the northern end of the Sea of Galilee, but more toward Tiberius—a region inhabited by Romans and other gentiles. Instead of going back to the areas of Jewish inhabitants, Jesus goes to the district of Tyre and Sidon, inland to the north and even further away from areas where the Jewish traditions resided. We are given no purpose or reason for this direction. But Jesus, by taking this direction, is crossing boundaries—cultural, political and ethnic. Considering his location, it is not surprising that a Canaanite woman approaches him seeking help for her daughter. She knows who Jesus is—crying out "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David, my daughter is tormented by a demon." What happens next makes us uncomfortable—it contradicts our image of Jesus as the one who welcomes all. Verse 23: "But he did not answer her at all." Where is the compassion that turned the solitude seeking Jesus into the one who healed all who came and then ensured they were all fed? The disciples, bothered by her continued shouting after them ask Jesus to send her away. Then Jesus' response really seems out of character to us. "He answered, I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel". A woman begging for mercy because of her daughter's need, and he responds he wasn't sent to help her. She persists. She won't stop

yelling. And not only that, but she's being offensive as she appropriates Jewish religious language to get what she wants when she calls Jesus, "Lord, son of David." as a Jewish woman would. But she isn't Jewish. Matthew calls her a Canaanite. In Jesus' time there was not a nation called Canaan, it was not even a defined ethnic group. But traditionally the ancient Israelites were warned to have nothing to do with the Canaanites—they were ungodly people. What we are being told in the text is that she's a dangerous pagan of another race and culture, someone a pious Rabbi would naturally keep away from. With the label of Canaanite woman attached to her she represents an old enemy, a temptress, an idol worshipper, and exploiter—any godly man should have nothing to do with her. Jesus' response is what is expected of a Jewish holy man. But it is now what we expect from Jesus. The woman, even with that denying of her petition, persists when she kneels before him saying, "Lord, help me." Jesus denies her again with more strongly worded rejections saying "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs". Jesus is implying that she is a dog. In that time and place, dogs were not viewed as friendly household pets. They were scavengers, dangerous pack animals who fed off the trash left on the street and in dumps. Because of their unclean nature, the term dog was a common derogatory name for Gentiles at that time. Jesus has just used a racial slur to describe a woman kneeling before him in grief over her daughter's condition. Isn't Jesus the one who reaches out to the poor, the outcast, and the lame; who accepts everyone and makes a place at the table for all? Throughout history this text has been avoided or has had attempts made to explain away this harshness, this hard heartedness depicted in Jesus. But there is another possibility. In much of what we learn of Jesus through the gospels it is Jesus' divinity which guides his actions. In this particular story we may be seeing more of the humanity of Jesus. In this story the picture we get makes us question his character. Here Jesus purposely isolates and insults a woman in need. But maybe in this passage his humanity offers us a mirror for our own humanity—the mirror image we don't always want to see. Our humanness is what leads us to make mistakes. Our humanity leaves us susceptible to the cultural norms of our day. Being human leaves us vulnerable to the sin around us—sin that often limits our vision and narrows our definitions of love. For Jesus, calling a Gentile a "dog" seems normal because that a common derogatory term that the people around you use. And avoiding her pleas is consistent with other places in the Gospels where it is clear that Jesus was sent to bring salvation to Israel. Before us today, in this text, Jesus exposes his weakness, his human nature, the reality that in this he is a lot more like us than we thought. He, like us, lets the stereotypes and insults of his culture become a part of his vocabulary. Instead of slinking away at his insult, the woman accepts the slur, but then says, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." Thankfully, within this text, Jesus' harsh tone is altered. The story doesn't end with his insult of the Canaanite woman. Although appearing mean at first, Jesus is humbled—he allows this foreign woman to reshape his view of God's kingdom. Jesus was sent as the Jewish Messiah, sent to proclaim salvation to those lost sheep of Israel. But God had bigger plans in mind. The future of God's kingdom is breaking into the present in this encounter and it jolts Jesus. This woman, kneeling, begging, crying out for help, changes his perspective. At the end of the narrative we find Jesus praising her faith and granting her request. The Canaanite woman, the outsider, shows Jesus that God is truly doing something miraculous in Israel and beyond. This foreign woman, like others in Israel's past, reveals God's purposes for all the people of this world. In story after story, from the Bible and from history, we often find that

God is trying to break into our reality to help us re-imagine our world. God usually does this through encounters with those who are different from us. Listening to and spending time with those whom we might rather avoid moves us to change because it teaches us to open our eyes and it challenges our assumptions. It moves us beyond our selfish desires and compels us to consider the need of people we do not know. It allows us to understand the reality of those who under conditions of hatred, prejudice and rejection that we have never ourselves encountered. It can move us to overturn the cultural and stereotypical norms that we've become accustomed to. We may not call people "dogs", but we have other terms that are equivalent to apply to others. When we think or use those types of terms we find our spiritual growth and transformation stunted by the sin that limits our view of God's kingdom. Whoever we have placed in that category, we need to remember "even them" are welcome in God's kingdom. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.