

“JESUS COMES TO BUCYRUS!”

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Text: Matthew 15:1-3, 7-28 NLT

God's Word: Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32 NLT

15 Some Pharisees and teachers of religious law now arrived from Jerusalem to see Jesus. They asked him, ² “Why do your disciples disobey our age-old tradition? For they ignore our tradition of ceremonial hand washing before they eat.” ³ Jesus replied, “And why do you, by your traditions, violate the direct commandments of God?”

⁷ You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you, for he wrote,

⁸ “These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.

⁹ Their worship is a farce,
for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God.”

¹⁰ Then Jesus called to the crowd to come and hear. “Listen,” he said, “and try to understand. ¹¹ It’s not what goes into your mouth that defiles you; you are defiled by the words that come out of your mouth.” ¹² Then the disciples came to him and asked, “Do you realize you offended the Pharisees by what you just said?” ¹³ Jesus replied, “Every plant not planted by my heavenly Father will be uprooted, ¹⁴ so ignore them. They are blind guides leading the blind, and if one blind person guides another, they will both fall into a ditch.” ¹⁵ Then Peter said to Jesus, “Explain to us the parable that says people aren’t defiled by what they eat.”

¹⁶ “Don’t you understand yet?” Jesus asked. ¹⁷ “Anything you eat passes through the stomach and then goes into the sewer. ¹⁸ But the words you speak come from the heart—that’s what defiles you. ¹⁹ For from the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, all sexual immorality, theft, lying, and slander. ²⁰ These are what defile you. Eating with unwashed hands will never defile you.”

²¹ Then Jesus left Galilee and went north to the region of Tyre and Sidon. ²² A Gentile woman who lived there came to him, pleading, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! For my daughter is possessed by a demon that torments her severely.” ²³ But Jesus gave her no reply, not even a word. Then his disciples urged him to send her away. “Tell her to go away,” they said. “She is bothering us with all her begging.” ²⁴ Then Jesus said to the woman, “I was sent only to help God’s lost sheep—the people of Israel.” ²⁵ But she came and worshiped him, pleading again, “Lord, help me!” ²⁶ Jesus responded, “It isn’t right to take food from the children and throw it to the dogs.” ²⁷ She replied, “That’s true, Lord, but even dogs are allowed to eat the scraps that fall beneath their masters’ table.” ²⁸ “Dear woman,” Jesus said to her, “your faith is great. Your request is granted.” And her daughter was instantly healed.

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How many of you like Winnie the Pooh? In one of his famous escapades, this loveable toy bear tries to trap an elephant—or, as he pronounces it, a Heffalump.

So, Pooh digs a hole to catch the Heffalump, and decides to bait the trap with some of his own favorite food: honey. But of course, it is very hard for Winnie the Pooh to part with honey, and he just can't bear to leave a whole jar of it in the trap, so he starts to eat some of it himself...excusing himself with the thought that it's important to make sure it really is honey, all the way down. It wouldn't do to have anything else, perhaps cheese or something, at the bottom. And so of course, by the time Winnie the Pooh is finally sure that it was honey all the way down the jar is empty!!!

For Pooh, what matters is what the jar really contains, all the way down. If it's only got honey at the top, but something quite different underneath, then what's the point? And this is what lies at the heart of what Jesus says about the Pharisees and their purity laws.

What's the point of keeping all the purity laws? To be the kind of person God always had in mind. What sort of person did God always have in mind? A person who was pure, not just on the surface, but all the way down to the very depths of the personality. But Jesus is saying that the purity laws of what is "clean" and what is "unclean" miss the point entirely.

What God is offering through Jesus Christ and a personal relationship with Him is a cure for the deep-level impurity we all suffer from. Being right with God has nothing to do with trying to follow a bunch of external laws. That will only make you a hypocrite and you will eventually fall into a pit.

Jesus Himself is the only remedy for the wickedness and uncleanness that infects us all. And Jesus, as the Remedy, needs to be applied to the disease, deep down inside each of our human personalities, so that we can be changed from the inside out!

This morning's Gospel Lesson marks a radical turning point in Jesus' teaching, ministry and in the history of human relations. As I mentioned, the Jewish people were experts, so to speak, at labeling what was "clean" and what was "unclean." And the most unclean thing in the entire universe was a human person who was not an Israelite!!!

The Israelites believed that they were God's only beloved people, and that they were the only ones who were going to be saved. And all this, simply because of their race!!! Everyone else were dirty, rotten, no good, less than human...dogs!

Prejudice was huge in Jesus' day, and it was religiously sanctioned racism. If you think we have a hard time getting along with persons who are different from us now...wow...we can't even imagine what it was like 2,000 years ago. And Jesus was the first Person ever to shine light on this wrong thinking and to revolutionize what it means that God is Love and that the key to life is that we are to love our neighbor as our self!

So just having finished speaking to His disciples about what makes a person "clean" or "unclean" Jesus moves forward and gives them a picture lesson, using a real person—the Canaanite woman!!! And what better place to come in contact with a "so-called" unclean person than to leave Jewish territory and enter Gentile territory.

Gentiles were any people who were not Jewish. We, for example, are Gentiles from birth. The Jews of Jesus' day would have deemed us "unclean," with no chance of being redeemed or saved. As a matter of fact, it would have been a dangerous thing to head into Gentile territory.

For example, if a Jew were to even eat Gentile food, that would cause that Jew to become "unclean". That's why the disciples always carried their own food with them, if they happened to go through Gentile territory.

Suppose, for example, the people in Crestline were God's Chosen Race. And we poor folks over here in Bucyrus were nothing but a bunch of "hell-bent heathen Gentiles." The people in Crestline would not want to have anything to do with us whatsoever. They certainly wouldn't eat at our restaurants. They would teach their children not to play with our children. They would not even speak to us, and if we happened to find ourselves walking down the same path, road or sidewalk as a person from Crestline, the person from Crestline would cross the road...quickly!!! If we were beat up, robbed and left in a ditch to die...unlike the good Samaritan, they would walk past on the other side. If we came to them pleading for help or healing they would call us "dogs"—a very derogatory name in Jesus' day—and tell us to leave them alone.

But if Jesus were to come to Bucyrus, well that would be a completely different story!!! And that, in a way, is what is happening in our Gospel Lesson for this morning.

The Canaanite woman is the first woman that Jesus ministered to outside of the nation of Israel. She and the centurion, who asked Jesus to heal his servant, are the first Gentiles that Jesus ministered to. This humble woman's story is significant in that Jesus' ministry to the entire world begins with her!!!

It's so awesome that this woman is not only a Gentile, but that she is also a Canaanite. For the Canaanites were the arch enemies of Israel. They are the people who were to be driven out of the Promised Land by the Israelites. They fought against God's covenant people. And in the Old Testament the people of Israel often got into trouble worshipping the gods of the Canaanites.

Yet, this woman seems to have a pretty good grasp on who Jesus is. She calls Him "Lord, Son of David." She asks Him for mercy and to heal her daughter. And when Jesus gives her the "politically correct" answer of "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel," she knows that the God of the Universe loves all people. And from her experience, from her faith in the One True God, the Gentiles begin turning to Christ in droves!!!

It's often thought that faith and Christianity didn't spread to the Gentiles until after Pentecost with Peter and Paul. And certainly, God used Peter and Paul to do this, but it started with Christ Himself!!! Jesus healed the woman's daughter.

But like all people who are healed and saved by Christ, the woman and her daughter did not keep this good news to themselves. For we read in verse 29 on that Jesus went from there and then "went up on a mountainside and sat down."

And what happens in this dark, pagan, Gentile land? “Great crowds came to [Jesus], bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them.” And then we are told that these “supposed” dogs...these folks who the religious leaders thought were so awful, undeserving, and beyond redemption “praised the God of Israel.”

And then, as Jesus had done for 5,000 Israelites, excluding women and children who weren't counted just a chapter before—Jesus did for 4,000 Gentiles, besides women and children. He had compassion on them and fed them!!! And He stayed with them for three days. And this is indeed, the most radical thing which has ever happened in human history up to this point!!!

It is also one of the clearest moments in the Gospels, perhaps except for the Samaritan Woman at the Well, where we are told God does not play favorites and we are not to play favorites either!!! With God, there are no outcasts; there are no throw aways!!! Every human creature is equally loved and important. And that is how we, as Christ's messengers on this earth, are to view people as well.

Who are the “so-called” dogs in our culture, in our community, in our area today? Who is the outcaste? Who is treated as if they do not matter?

I was speaking to a colleague of mine this week who was telling me that there is a growing population of homeless people in Bucyrus. They come to our area because they are dropped off here or they've migrated this way as shelters down in Marion and Mansfield are filled. They are literally stuck.

How can we help? We can support BORN with our gifts and our time—our community organization that helps people get their feet back under them and can provide emergency shelter in most cases. But BORN can only do so much because not a lot of churches support this ministry.

There is nothing more frustrating, and I don't understand why, in an area where there are so many churches, we do not have enough help and do not have a place for those children of God who are homeless—men, women and children--to be kept off the streets and out of danger.

Jesus' ministry was to the poor, the outcaste, the marginalized, the discriminated against, the women and children, and widows and orphans. And Jesus' ministry is our ministry as well. Jesus has come Bucyrus. Jesus is in the woods behind Kroger and down at the old bridge where the population of the homeless is growing. Jesus is in the hotel rooms where families with children are suffering and barely making it. Jesus is in the homes surrounding this building where people are lonely, sick, suffering, lost, depressed. Jesus is among those lost in the darkness of sin and hatred.

And as followers of Jesus, we are to be there too. May this be our mission, and our prayer...that we may go where Jesus goes and do what Jesus does.

Amen.