

# "Proceeding from the Heart"

Matthew 15:10-28

August 14, 2005

The Sunday school teacher was carefully explaining the story of Elijah the Prophet and the false prophets of Baal. She explained how Elijah built the altar, put wood upon it, cut the steer in pieces, and laid it upon the altar. And then, Elijah commanded the people of God to fill four barrels of water and pour it over the altar. He had them do this four times. "Now," said the teacher, "can anyone in the class tell me why the Lord would have Elijah pour water over the steer on the altar?" A little girl in the back of the room started waving her hand, "I know! I know!" she said, "To make the gravy!"

"Listen and understand!" What a great opener. Jesus calls the crowd to gather around [no doubt inviting them to move to the pews up front]. And He speaks a provocative word. It is not exactly a simile that compares two things - but a turn of a phrase - it is an image that draws the hearer in. I love those things. I try to find an image with which to open a sermon - sometimes I find just what I am looking for - sometimes I fail. Sometimes I am told that the jokes or stories were dumb, lame or poorly told - sometimes they just don't turn out to fit the message. I do really appreciate your polite laughter at those pivotal moments. - Jesus always seemed to have the gift of telling the story or painting an image that drew the hearer in and compelled them to listen.

"Listen and understand! It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person ....." Of course, we often fail to see the relevance. As cute as this opening word from Jesus is - it just doesn't fit our situation - it doesn't speak to us. — Permit me to just share a word of ancient history and tradition. At the end of it you may all say with one voice, "Isn't that nice - so what?"

More than 500 years before Jesus came on the scene, the people of Israel had fallen away from their God and eventually the nation became weak and when they were no longer walking with God they were conquered by the Babylonians. For a long time they were slaves before there was a remnant of people were allowed to return and begin to rebuild their nation. In their zeal to be more faithful to God, the Jewish rabbis began trying to interpret their laws so that the people would know exactly what they needed to do in order to be acceptable to God. One of the religious practices that developed out of this was you never ate without first washing. It was more than just washing up - it was a religious ritual of purification. For hundreds of years it became the standard of acceptable behavior even though it was never written down as a rule until around the year 200 AD. - -  
- If we were to go back to the beginning of this 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew we would see that the problem that brought out this provocative comment of Jesus was

that the Pharisees had confronted Jesus about His 'rowdy' disciples who didn't even wash before eating. It was unacceptable - they were defiling themselves and it was a reflection on the whole nation of Israel. - In response, Jesus turns to the crowds of people nearby and calls them to gather around and says, "Listen and understand! It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles!"

Well - there you have it - a bit of history and tradition. And now you may all say, in unison: "Isn't that nice – so what?"

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I do hope that all of that was remotely interesting. But I agree - it is easy to hear some of this stuff and just say, 'so what'. We have not made a religious law out of hand washing. Medically we know that it is a good idea and we try to encourage good habits of cleanliness. Sometimes, growing up it may seem as though mothers have made washing before eating into something of religious importance. But it would be easy for us to say that none of this stuff about eating with out washing really applies to our lives today! But I find myself thinking - Oh contraire ...

In so many ways it seems as though we have made a religion of what goes into and onto the body. I remember hearing at the beginning of the year that the top issue of the year was going to be diets. The 'religion' of our world tells us what makes us acceptable. Eat the right food, and diet yourself down to the right weight - and then you will be acceptable. Wear the right clothes with the right labels. Style your hair the right way and put on the right make up - - - then you will be acceptable. We do get so caught up in these issues. But when do we talk about and worry about what proceeds from the heart?

"Listen and understand! It is not what goes into our mouths or what we put on our bodies that defile a person or make them acceptable. It is what proceeds from the heart!" Who are you? Who are you - not based on what you wear or how you look or how in touch you are with the latest fashion - but who are you as you are revealed by what proceeds from your heart?

In an initial reading of this Gospel text today one might easily imagine that the first half has nothing to do with the second half. But they are intimately connected. A woman comes to Jesus - a woman who is unacceptable in most polite Jewish circles. She is not one of the Israelites. She does not have the right credentials. And she is just plain irritating. The disciples want Jesus to just send her away. But He does not. I think that Jesus uses this as a teaching moment for His followers. I believe that it is more for His disciples [and for us] that Jesus says, '[everybody believes that] I am only sent to the right people - to the people of Israel - to the acceptable, chosen people - you don't qualify - you don't meet the standards many set'. But in the interaction that follows Jesus is able to see

this woman's heart - what proceeded from her heart was not hatred or anger.  
What proceeded from her heart was faith in a loving God!

What is it that proceeds from your heart? Is it faith? Is it love, forgiveness,  
peace? What does our God see? Pouring water over our hands does not make  
us clean any more than pouring water over an offering of oxen makes gravy. But  
when we walk with God - when we place our faith in God and allow His love to  
flow through us our hearts and lives are cleansed by Him. May we strive to allow  
that love proceed from our hearts each new day.

AMEN