

Sunday, August 16, 2026
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 15A)
Matthew 15.10-28
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Schooled”

Schooled. A term that is, at the same time, a blurring of proper English and slang. In proper English usage, schooled means to teach, train, or discipline someone. As a slang term, it takes on a slightly more biting connotation, meaning to defeat, or outsmart someone. Subtle differences, shades of gray, depending on intent. As we look at the Gospels, we see that Jesus is a master at schooling people, particularly his opponents. How many times does he go up against the scribes and the Pharisees, seeking to trap him on some liturgical or theological point, only to have Jesus turn the tables and school them in their own laws; resulting in them walking away, scratching their heads, and muttering, “what just happened?”

That’s what’s happening in the first half of today’s Gospel reading. In both the proper English usage and in the slang. Jesus is preaching to a crowd, attempting to explain his understanding of what it means to truly live a faithful, righteous life, in moral terms as opposed to the religious authorities’ focus on dietary laws as a means to ritual purity. “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.” Effectively saying, “it’s not what you eat that makes you pure and righteous, but what you say and do.” Schooling the crowd in the proper English sense of the term, while subtly schooling the scribes and Pharisees in the slang sense of the term. The unwritten subtext being that the religious authorities are focusing on the wrong thing when it comes to righteous and faithful living. They are focusing on the letter of the law instead of the intent. To the point that they are obsessed with what foods are considered clean vs unclean, as opposed to focusing on moral teachings that are the foundation of truly faithful and righteous living according to God’s laws. Or put in more generalized terms, that purity and religious faithfulness are not about the blind worship of tradition—“we’ve always done it that way”—but about seeking to understand more fully God’s purposes and to strive to live accordingly. This is what true faithfulness and righteousness are about.

Seeking to more fully understand the nuances of Jesus’ perspective, the disciples then go to him and ask that he explain it to them. Which he does. Using some rather graphic imagery about food being eaten—taken into the mouth—only to end up in the sewer after digestion runs its course; as opposed to words spoken by the mouth, which have the potential to truly defile. The food ingested merely providing nourishment and not having anything to do with, not truly contributing to, one’s righteousness, one’s moral character. What comes out of the mouth being the true indication of one’s righteousness and moral character. As Jesus puts in, “what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart.”

While the religious authorities seem to be more concerned with what foods defile and harm the body, Jesus is more concerned with what comes out of one’s body—one’s words and, by extension, one’s actions—which have the potential to defile and harm. To defile and harm oneself, but even more so, to defile and harm others. In the colorful imagery Jesus employs, the sewer carries away any mistakes one might have made by putting something considered

unclean into the body. And the effect of such food is purely temporary, not adding to the moral character or righteous nature of the individual. Careless words and actions—and even more so, intentionally hurtful or cruel words and actions—have the potential for lasting impact. That which comes out of a person—words and actions—are not just washed down the sewer like yesterday’s meal. They linger. Their damage having ongoing impacts.

Our Gospel reading then moves to another scene, in which Jesus and the disciples are traveling in Gentile territory. Where Jesus has an uncomfortable encounter with a Canaanite woman. An encounter that perfectly illustrates—painfully so—the point Jesus had just been trying to make to the religious authorities. An encounter in which the table is turned. An encounter in which, rather than doing the schooling, Jesus is the one being schooled. By a Gentile woman, no less.

Jesus is approached by a Canaanite woman, whose daughter is tormented by a demon. Presumably she has exhausted all other options available under her own religious and cultural systems. Somehow, she knows a great deal about Jesus, particularly his reputation as a healer. In desperation, she cries out to him. She cries out for the very thing that is the cornerstone of Jesus’ ministry: for healing, for compassion and mercy. And Jesus ignores her. You could argue that he was just trying to follow appropriate social protocols: to not engage with a woman; to not engage with foreigners; to not engage with Gentiles. But really, when have these social restrictions stopped Jesus in the past?

The woman is persistent, to say the least. She keeps going at Jesus, trying to get his attention. Finally, in desperation—to shut her up, to get rid of her?—Jesus breaks protocol and addresses her. “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” The unspoken part being, “and that’s not you or your daughter.” Lest we be too judgmental about Jesus’ lack of compassion, we need to remember that we have a much broader picture of who Jesus is based on the entirety of his life and ministry, on what happened through his death and resurrection, and what has happened since. But at this point, Jesus is still in the midst of his public ministry. And fairly early in it, really. He is still trying to figure out who he is and what that means for his mission and ministry. He is still trying to understand and live into who he is called to be. And, at this point, his understanding is still somewhat limited: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Completely consistent with Jewish theology of mission of the time.

But the Canaanite woman is going to help him in his understanding. Not deterred by his refusal to help, she presses: “Lord, help me.” She sought out Jesus with the unshakable conviction in God’s mercy, and with the insight—divinely inspired?—that Jesus was the one to provide what she and her daughter need. Jesus is still not swayed. And, as if Jesus refusing to help is uncomfortable enough to witness, things are about to get more heated. And more ugly. As often happens in moments of frustration, as if to further emphasize his position, Jesus says, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Ouch. Did Jesus just call the woman and her daughter dogs? Well, yes. Yes, he did. No denying it. And frankly, no real way to soften the sting. To her or to us and our image of Jesus. Dog was a term that Jews routinely applied to Gentile pagans. An unflattering, derogatory term based on racial and religious identity. Based on being other than Jewish. Raising questions about prejudice, divine election, and the limits of God’s mercy.

An uncomfortable moment for Jesus, as well as the woman. And an uncomfortable one for us, as well. We don't want to think about Jesus using a racist slur against anyone, particularly a desperate woman trying to help her child. But we also need to remember that, just as Jesus is the Son of God, he is also fully human. As such, he was the product of the society and religion in which he was raised. And no matter how hard we try, when frustrated, when placed in uncomfortable situations, our ingrained training—over 30 years' worth, in Jesus' case—have a tendency of rearing its ugly head. Even as, throughout his public ministry, he continually seeks to grow beyond such restrictive views and perspectives. Which the Canaanite woman is happy to help him with. Even though the language of “dogs” is dehumanizing and demeaning, the woman identifies with and even embraces the term. In her tenacity, she responds, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.” A masterful statement meant to remind Jesus of his true ministry, not as a human teacher, but as God's Son. His ministry is to have mercy and compassion on all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, or gender. And a powerful indication that she is not going to allow tradition—“we've always done it that way”—to be a barrier to God's grace. That she is going to claim what is rightly due her and her daughter.

In a word, Jesus has been schooled. He hears what the woman is saying and gets the message. “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” In so doing, flipping the whole story, from affront to affirmation. From an affront of the woman because of being a Gentile pagan to being an affirmation of her profound faith. Jesus is big enough not to be ashamed to learn something from this Gentile, this Canaanite woman. Something that served to expand his ministry, no longer solely being to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel,” to now being a ministry to any and all who are in need of compassion and mercy. To the point that this perspective informed Jesus' ministry moving forward. Informed his final message to his disciples before his ascension: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28.19). All nations. Jesus gracefully learned and incorporated the lesson from the Canaanite woman, not just into his own ministry, but into the mission and ministry of the Church his followers would form as the means of carrying on his work in the world.

The flow of today's Gospel story, uncomfortable thought it may be, carries an important reminder for us today. For the Church that is the Body of Christ in the world. The Gospel starts off with Jesus teaching an important lesson to his followers to not get hung up on limited, antiquated traditions as the definition of faithful and righteous living, but rather the importance of expanding our perspective of what faithful and righteous living entails. Namely that it is about our words and actions. Then, in the second part of the Gospel story, Jesus himself gets caught up in the limited, antiquated traditions that have had a part in defining his life and ministry. Completely forgetting the lesson he had just taught the crowd, as well as the religious authorities. And it was a Canaanite woman, a foreigner, a Gentile, who reminded him of that lesson in a very personal way.

Today's Gospel lesson shows us that there is room for continual growth and improvement when it comes to seeking how to live faithfully and righteously. Jesus taught that to others, schooling both his followers and his enemies. Jesus himself learned that lesson in a very personal way, schooled by one who epitomized what it meant to be “other.” In a way that reshaped the remainder of his public ministry and informed the mission of the Church that would carry on his work. But even in the course of our history as Church, we have continually

had to relearn the lesson Jesus taught and that Jesus himself learned in today's Gospel. As we have sought to continually break down barriers that have served as limits to God's mercy and compassion. But when it comes to God's mercy and compassion, there are no barriers, no limits. Our job as the Body of Christ is to continually be schooled by the teachings of Christ so that when we do encounter such imposed barriers, we have the courage to be willing to change and to act consistent with our Lord's teachings.