

## Matthew 15:(10-20), 21-28

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

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The story of the Canaanite woman in verses 21-28 really needs the discussion about what makes a person "clean" / "undefiled" in verses 10-20 in order to help us focus on the significance of what comes out of the mouth of Jesus and this non-Jewish (and therefore "unclean") woman.

The discussion in verses 10 to 20 should not be read as an unconditional attack on, or dismissal of Jewish customs and traditions. Rather it is an attempt - once again - by Jesus to teach his uncomprehending, dull-witted, disciples to get to the heart of the matter; to see through external, social conventions to the inner reality of what God desires for us individually and as communities.

"Social conventions" are time-tested codes of behaviour for living rightly.

That is, they are answers to the questions: "What must I **DO** to show my reverence for God; my honour for my family; and my social standing in my community?" Behaving in these ways will make us "clean" and "pure" and "undefiled."

Social conventions develop over centuries, and by definition, are **NEVER** explicitly discussed or agreed upon. A crucial aspect of "convention" is that it is unspoken, and taken for granted. Indeed, so taken for granted that we are by and large completely unaware of how much these codes are embedded in our most deeply held sense of what is true, right, and just.

Social conventions are the standards by which we judge the correctness of someone's behaviour. And therefore, also their motives. Someone whose outward behaviour is bad must also have inner motives that are bad.

However, the problem with social conventions is that they are also, by definition, conservative, closed, static, and unimaginative; and not progressive, open, dynamic, or creative. And therefore, while they maintain the distilled wisdom from past experience, they will also inevitably collide with the on-going creativity of God. Or as Isaiah puts it, social conventions are human wisdom and not God's wisdom.

In Jesus' day, washing ones hands before eating was **NOT** for hygienic reasons (they had no knowledge of bacteria). Hand washing was part of the ritual preparation that outwardly expressed inner reverence and respect for the Creator of the Universe who provided the food about to be eaten.

So when the Pharisees publically challenge Jesus and question why his disciples are not washing their hands before eating (verses 1-2), they are really saying, "You and your disciples cannot be holy men because you are not behaving in holy ways."

As usual, Jesus' response does not directly address their challenge. Instead of talking about hand-washing, he changes the topic to what goes into and comes out of our mouths. His response is about how what is in our hearts leads to what comes out of our mouths. And, without saying so directly, he implies that what has just come out of the mouths of the Pharisees has shown their inward evil thoughts.

If we hold this teaching that what comes out of mouths is what truly makes us clean - what truly shows our reverence for God - then we can hear the story of the Canaanite woman in a new light.

Immediately following the teaching about ritual cleanliness, Jesus takes his followers into foreign - unclean - territory, near the cities of Tyre and Sidon. And in this unclean place a most unconventional thing happens. A foreign (gasp!) woman (horrors!) comes alone (unthinkable!) and speaks (outrageous!) to the disciples and won't obey (scandalous!) their instruction to stop following them (shocking!).

But this incident is a beautiful illustration of the teaching Jesus has just made. Outwardly, this woman has nothing about her that is "clean." But she has two things in her heart that make her right with God:

- her unwavering, nagging, persistent care for her daughter; and,
- her unwavering, nagging, persistent trust that Jesus can cure her daughter.

And these two things cause Jesus to undergo a change of heart himself.

Taken together, verses 10-20 and 21-28, provide a wonderful illustration of the struggles we face as communities of faith. For we too have developed unspoken conventions for proper behaviour; and we too must be constantly be open to the unconventional and foreign that give us new insight into the wisdom of God.

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