

Year A Proper 20 “Seeing the Tree: How the faith of a Canaanite woman helps the disciples better understand God” Matthew 15:(10-20), 21-28

Maybe you’ve heard the saying, “You can’t see the forest for the trees”. Well, the scribes and the Pharisees had gone way beyond this – they were so busy examining every little leaf, they didn’t know they were looking at a tree.

The scribes and the Pharisees – they were the people trained to know every little detail of the Law and they were the people who dedicated their lives to following every little detail of the Law.

They were getting worried – this Jesus person was breaking the rules but he was attracting a large following. He was letting his disciples pluck and eat grain on the Sabbath. He was healing people on the Sabbath. But the people loved him. They were even starting to talk about him being the Messiah. This could mean big trouble for the establishment.

The scribes and the Pharisees were going to put an end to this nonsense. They were going to show the people that Jesus couldn’t possibly be the Jewish Messiah when he wasn’t even following the Jewish Laws.

So, they caught up with Jesus near Gennesaret and you can imagine their delight when the first thing they saw was him breaking their laws *again*. They seized their opportunity and confronted him. “Aha,” they said. “Why are you not following the teaching of our ancestors? Why are you not washing your hands before you eat?”

Now, the hand-washing they’re talking about here had nothing to do with cleaning away germs. This hand-washing was a practice to provide *ritual* purification. There is no Old Testament law requiring ordinary folk to wash their

hands before eating. Priests, only priests, were required to go through this ritual washing. So how did it become a “teaching of the ancestors” that everyone had to wash before meals?

This developed over a lot of years as faithful Jews – particularly the Pharisees – took the old, written laws and updated them to apply to their current, everyday lives. This process created a very large spoken tradition of legal cases and teachings that they called the “teachings of the ancestors”.

A modern example would be that Orthodox Jews are forbidden to drive their vehicles on the Sabbath – even though cars weren’t even invented when the original law – to do no manner of work on the Sabbath – had been given to them by God.

Our part of Christ’s church has done this sort of thing too – young people being confirmed were expected to be able to recite the 10 Commandments, The Lord’s Prayer, and the Apostles’ Creed.

Nowhere in the New Testament does it say that baptism and confirmation are to be two separate events. Nowhere does it say we get baptized as babies and confirmed when we’re about 12, and nowhere does it say we have to have certain things memorized before that happens. There are loads of other teachings too – the number of candles that should be in the Sanctuary, whether to stand or kneel, where to put the cross...I have come across people in other churches who refuse to leave their pew until after the candles have been extinguished. Different congregations have different “rules” and they are all things that came into being long after the New Testament was written.

These things develop over the years for practical reasons and to help us in our relationship with God. So, does getting an A+ on your confirmation class exam mean you have a good understanding of the profoundness of God's love for all of us and a thorough understanding of the depth of meaning surrounding Jesus' death on the cross? No. But, it is, perhaps, a start. For the scribes and the Pharisees, their continuous development of more and more little rules to help them live a life pleasing to God was actually leading them further away from God. The same thing can be said of many of the little rules that are followed in our churches week in and week out. Jesus' message is for us today too.

When the scribes and Pharisees confront Jesus about not washing his hands, Jesus turns the tables on them and says clean hands don't mean you love God. He points out that following their teachings – like encouraging people to give all of their money to the temple – is actually causing people to break God's commandments – like honour your father and mother.

Jesus is telling them that they're way too focused on the hundreds of little leaves – they've forgotten about the tree. They can have the cleanest hands in the world and still have a heart full of hate. Jesus then turns to the crowd and tells them not to make the same mistake the scribes and Pharisees are making. We can stand when we're supposed to stand, say the responses, light the candles in the proper order and still not be Christians in the true sense of the word. He tells the crowd, and us, to take off the zoom lens that is so narrowly focused and widen the shot to take in what we are actually looking at. Jesus isn't telling us that we don't need to follow *any* rules – he says, "I have not come to get rid of the Law, but to fulfill the Law. Stop focusing on the little laws you've developed –

and are now using for your benefit – and remember the laws that God gave to you and remember what those laws are for – to help you to love God and to love each other.”

He continues on to tell them this love comes from inside of them – from their hearts and minds. What they eat and how often they wash their hands has nothing to do with how much or how little they love God, each other, and how much God loves them. What we eat does not defile us but, rather, what is in the heart. We know that but, for the disciples, this was mind-boggling. This went against what they had been taught since they were two feet tall. What Jesus was telling them was a hard lesson for them to learn and that’s where the Canaanite woman comes into the story.

Matthew uses the term “Canaanite” very deliberately. When his listeners heard “Canaanite”, they thought “enemy”. Canaanites, in the opinion of the disciples, were unclean low-lives who worshipped a fake god named Baal.

This Canaanite woman had great faith in Jesus and believed he could heal her demon-possessed daughter. Some people would tell you that Jesus wanted nothing to do with her and that her persistent faith changed his mind. This is not what Matthew wants you to take from this story.

Jesus knew exactly what he was doing. This encounter with the Canaanite woman was for the benefit of his disciples. Jesus went knowingly into the district of Tyre and Sidon. If you cross the bridge into America, you know you’re going to bump into some Americans. Jesus knew he was going to bump into some gentiles – specifically a Canaanite according to Matthew. Jesus also knew he was going to find faith in these gentiles. If you rewind the tape a little, you’ll find that just a

few days earlier, Jesus had said, as his disciples listened, “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.” The people of Tyre and Sidon would have believed in Jesus and repented. Oh yes, Jesus knew exactly what he was doing when he led his disciples toward Tyre and Sidon.

Let’s watch and listen as the scene unfolds: Jesus is ignoring this Canaanite woman wailing loudly after him, the disciples are embarrassed and want him to send her away. Jesus answers the disciples with, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” This woman believes Jesus to be the Messiah. We know this because she calls him “Son of David.” In Jesus’ response to the disciples, she hears Jesus acknowledge that indeed he is the Messiah – but only for Israel. To the woman now kneeling at his feet, Jesus says he can’t give to her what was meant for Israel. Jesus knows he – as Messiah – must stay faithful to God’s chosen people even when they reject him. But Jesus knows the Scriptures inside out and backwards – he knows that God told Abraham he’d be the father of many nations; that the Messiah would be a light to the Gentiles, that God was God of *all* people. So, when Jesus said he couldn’t give Israel’s food to the gentiles, this woman’s great faith allowed her to figure out what Jesus already knew and so she agreed wholeheartedly with him...Yes, you are Israel’s Messiah but there are leftovers for me – you are my Messiah too.

Jesus praises her great faith in front of his stunned disciples and heals her daughter. This was the real life experience the disciples needed in order to believe what Jesus had told them earlier. What you eat, what you touch, how

much you wash doesn't mean you have great faith. This unclean woman who had never followed the hundreds of unwritten laws added on to God's laws – *she* has great faith. She sees the bigger picture. *Her* focus is on *God*.

So, in those times when we get caught up in rules that aren't God's rules – especially when those rules are causing division – or even when we get caught up in life's busyness and we're doing things by memory and not with our heart, let us remember to take a step back, readjust our focus, and look at the tree.