

“It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out that defiles.”

On the face of it, this saying is about food. Food was a big issue in the early Church. Jesus was a Jew and the earliest Christians were Jews. Among other things, to be a Jew means keeping the dietary laws laid out in scripture, keeping Kosher. Even today, Jews do not eat pork, they do not eat shrimp or shellfish, they do not eat meat and milk at the same meal. They observe these dietary restrictions because the bible says so and their tradition has always done so.

So one of the biggest and most controversial issues in the early Church was, did you have to do everything the bible says; do you have to observe the dietary laws and other laws laid out in the bible for the Jews in order to be a good Christian? St. Paul talks a lot about this issue in his various letters. By including this story, Matthew is dealing with it, too.

On the face of it, when Jesus says, ‘it’s not the stuff you put in your mouth that defiles you,’ he’s giving the OK for us Gentile Christians to go ahead and enjoy that bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich. But the real teaching is far broader: It is not what goes into a life that makes it pure or impure; it is what comes out of that life that matters.

Jesus is telling us, it’s not the circumstances that go into making you what you are that make you pure or impure, good or bad, it is the fruit that you bring forth from your life that defines

you. This teaching sets the stage for Jesus' meeting with the Canaanite woman who comes to beg for the healing of her daughter.

The biggest scandal in this story is probably not that the woman is a Canaanite. The biggest scandal was that it was *a woman* who spoke to Jesus. Women did not address strange men in Jesus' day and age. That she was also Canaanite and probably a pagan was just icing on the cake. The disciples want Jesus to send her away; as a Canaanite she is impure, and by speaking to him she is acting improperly. At first, it seems that Jesus is going to turn her away; but she persists, causing Jesus to praise her, "Great is your faith."

The word "faith" means two things simultaneously. On the one hand, it refers to trust or reliance: "I trust you; I have faith in you." On the other hand, it refers to faithfulness. By her persistence, the woman demonstrates both the trust she has that her daughter can be healed and also the persistent faithfulness to make it happen that is the true mark of faith.

The Canaanite woman, like un-Kosher food, represented something that was unclean and impure under the law. As a Canaanite, she didn't even worship the same God as Jesus. And yet, what came from her lips, her desire to see her daughter cured, that was pure. So here is the lesson: It is not what we are or what goes into us to make what we are that defiles or makes us good or bad, or pure or impure; it is what flows back out of the heart that defines us.

All of the things in your life which have made you what are, all the things that have gone into making you *you* -- what you've done, what's been done to you -- they don't matter. What matters to God is what comes out of you.

Today's Old Testament lesson deals with the same principle in a different context. In the Old Testament lesson we read the story of Joseph, whose whole life is shaped by the betrayal of his own brothers. Because of them he was forced into slavery and even spent a long time in prison. Yet when they later come to him in need, Joseph repays them with blessings. Betrayal was what went into Joseph from his brothers, yet blessings were what came out.

You may remember that Joseph was the favorite son of his father, Israel, and he kept irritating his brothers while they were busy shepherding sheep by telling them about dreams in which he was living like a king and they weren't. They envied the fact that Joseph was their father's favorite, and they didn't much like it that he was constantly rubbing it in their faces. So after deciding whether to just kill him or sell him as a slave to foreigners, his brothers staged a fake death, dipping Joseph's cloak in sheep's blood so they could tell their father he had been killed by a wild animal, and sold him into slavery to a group of passing nomads.

In this week's installment, a famine has settled over Israel forcing Joseph's brothers to go to Egypt to find food. By this

time Joseph has overcome all his trials and become the Pharaoh's right-hand man. You might think that Joseph, recognizing his brothers, would seize this opportunity to punish their treachery, especially since he was now in such a powerful position. If he had, then his elder brother Judah would never have become the patriarch of the line leading to King David and to Jesus, and the Bible would have been a much, much shorter book. The whole story would have ended there.

But instead of taking revenge for what his brothers had done, Joseph went about the divine work of reconciliation. It wasn't the betrayal that went into making Joseph's life that made him great, it was the blessing that came out from him that earned him his place in Israel's story. He could have ignored his brothers and let them starve. He could have had them killed. But instead Joseph says, "Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life."

Bad things went into Joseph's relationship with his brothers. He had been an obnoxious braggart. In turn, they dealt with him treacherously. Bad things went in, but blessing came out. And the blessings are what defined Joseph. Joseph, like the Canaanite woman, had great faith. *He trusted that whatever happened to him, good or bad, would eventually be used by God to some purpose, and he remained faithful to God in spite of everything that happened.*

What does all this mean for us? Well, in the first place, if you pay attention to your own life, you will see that even the bad things that happen to you always carry the seeds and the possibility of blessing. *If you trust the things that happen to you to God* and remain faithful in your living, you will in time see that God is able to bring blessing *even* out of a curse.

The second thing we can learn is that we do not receive God's blessings for our own benefit. Joseph wasn't blessed because God wanted to make Joseph rich and powerful. Joseph was blessed so that he could, in turn, bless his brothers, the very ones who had betrayed him. And through them, all of us are blessed as well. The Canaanite woman's faithfulness did not earn her a winning lottery ticket, but it did become a blessing to her daughter who was healed because of her faithfulness.

"It is not what goes in . . . it is what comes out . . ." God doesn't really care that you were born a Canaanite, man or a woman, Gentile or a Jew, gay or straight, black or white, rich or poor. And this aspect of this teaching is often particularly difficult for us: *God doesn't judge our actions towards others based on what they've done to us.* God cares about the blessing we produce through our faith and faithfulness to Him, even to those like Joseph's brothers who might deserve otherwise.

"It is not what goes in . . . it is what comes out . . ." It is our faith and faithfulness that make us whole. It is through faith in Jesus Christ and faithfulness to him that we are saved. And also,

through our faith and faithfulness the world is reconciled to God.