

# Merciful to All

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## August 17, 2008 | Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper15)

### Lectionary citations

Gen 45:1-15 with Ps 133

Rom 11:1-2a, 29-32

Matt 15: (10-20), 21-28

At a recent session, I was talking to my counselor about my struggle to find an identity as a pastor. I said that I struggled being a somewhat conservative pastor in a quite liberal denomination. However, she challenged me to consider whether those labels of "liberal" and "conservative" were particularly useful in this situation. On consideration, I had to concede that my particular kind of traditional Christianity could not find a comfortable home outside of the UCC. I am a conservative pastor, but I may have more in common with my liberal UCC colleagues than with conservatives in other denominations. I am still thinking this through. However, the point is simple, as a person with a chronic mental illness told me, "Labels are for cans, not for people."

If we consider the time and place where Jesus preached, taught, and healed, labeling people was very common and very important. The most important label for Jesus' people was whether you were a Jew, a member of one of the 12 tribes of Israel, or whether you were a Gentile, everyone else in the world. The Jews were God's chosen people and their religious leaders put a great deal of energy into emphasizing and strengthening their separation from the Gentiles. In today's Gospel Jesus confronts one of the practices that separated the Jews from the Gentiles, the Jewish practice of ritual washing. Ritual washing was not designed to remove dirt or germs. The purity it was intended to restore was a spiritual purity, an act of preparing things and people to be ready to be set aside for God's use.

The traditions that Jesus confronted were intended to maintain a special relationship between God and his people. This relationship was based on a covenant, a binding mutual agreement. The Old Testament is the history of these covenants; how they were made, how they were broken—always by the people rather than by God—and how they will be restored. Why did God covenant with the tribes of Israel? I believe that God chose the tribes of Israel as his instruments to bring peace, justice, mercy, and love to all people, not just to the Jews. Today, I would like to mention three of the covenants in the Bible: the covenants through Abraham, Moses, and David. To over simplify, these three covenants established a people, a Law, and a leader. The covenant through Abraham established that the Jews would be a separate people identified through male circumcision, that they would be a great nation, and that they would receive the Land of Canaan as their homeland. God said, *“Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.”* The promise was to Abraham and all his children, but the blessing would be to all people.

The covenant through Moses established that the Jews would be the people of the Law. Through this covenant, the Jews received the Law that governed their everyday life and that prescribed how they would worship God. If the people would follow this Law, God would *“rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”* The covenant with Abraham was not revoked. The Jews were to finally go into the land of Canaan and conquer that land from the people that lived there. The Law of Moses was intended to preserve the unique identity of the Jewish people, as they became a nation living among other nations. The emphasis was on maintaining the close and exclusive relationship between God and his people. This is why the Ten Commandments start with *“You shall have no other gods before me.”* God still intended to make a nation that would be a blessing to all the earth.

The covenant through David was to establish a great king of Israel, to complete the establishment of Israel as a great nation. Related to this covenant was the building of the Temple in Jerusalem and establishing Jerusalem as the religious center of the Jewish people. This covenant is best summarized in the words of David to his son Solomon:

*“Walk in his ways, and keep his decrees and commands, his laws and requirements, as written in the Law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all you do and wherever you go, and that the LORD may keep his promise to me: ‘If your descendants watch how they live, and if they walk faithfully before me with all their heart and soul, you will never fail to have a man on the throne of Israel.’”*

To summarize, through these covenants God established a people, a Law, and a king. If you read the Old Testament you will see that the Jews broke these covenants again and again, most often by worshipping the gods of their neighbors, the Baals of the Canaanites and the other people around them. By the time of Jesus, the Jews had lost their land to the Romans and no longer had a king of the House of David. They did still have their identity as a people, and they did still have the Law.

The Pharisees who Jesus criticized were trying to restore the covenant with God by being zealous in how they followed the Law. Yet Jesus pointed out that they had surrounded the Law with the “traditions of the elders,” traditions which were originally intended to clarify the Law, but which had come to defeat its original purpose. The Pharisees had come to focus on visible actions that to them demonstrated righteousness—praying, washing, and fasting. They had forgotten that the purpose of the law was to form the human heart after the heart of God. As the prophet Jeremiah says, *“I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.”* Once the law became something external, a body of rules and traditions, human ingenuity found plenty of ways to twist the Law to suit selfish ends. Although many of the Pharisees were quite sincere in their desire to be righteous in God’s eyes by following the law, others were quite cynical in working the angles. In any situation, at work or at home, where there are too many rules, we are always tempted to show how clever we are by getting away with as much as we can while still being a “good little boy or girl.”

Because the Pharisees focused so much on actions and appearances, labeling people became very important to them: clean or unclean, sinner or righteous, Jew or Gentile. The Pharisees emphasized the Laws and customs describing how spiritual uncleanness was spread by contact. Some of the Pharisees seem to have become obsessed with avoiding contact with anything unholy. They came to believe that if they kept themselves pure enough, the covenant between God and his people might somehow be restored. Moreover, of all the things that could make you unclean, contact with unclean people was probably the worst.

This helps explain the fascinating exchange between Jesus and the Canaanite woman in today's Gospel. The covenants between God and the Jews had not been revoked. Jesus was born into God's chosen people, he had God's Law written in his heart, and he would be the Messiah, the savior from the House of David. In him, all three covenants would be restored and the children of Abraham would be a blessing to all nations. Jesus transformed these covenants, broadened them, made them more inclusive, and restored God's original purpose in making those covenants. The new covenant through the body and blood of Christ would contain the old covenants, but in a new form, available to all people; man or woman, slave or free, Greek or Jew.

Jesus was a Jew and he chose his disciples from among the Jews. It was through the Jews that God would give a new hope to all people. Jesus started with the "lost sheep of Israel" and through them he built the Church. However, Jesus looked for faith in all people from all nations. The Canaanite woman is not a kind of person anyone would expect to have faith in Jesus, the Messiah who came from the Jews. The Canaanites were the Jew's most bitter enemy. They were the occupiers of the chosen land, the land of milk and honey, and the Jews believed that God wanted them to exterminate the Canaanites. The Canaanites were Baal worshipers and sacrificed their children to the fire. For a teacher

of the Law like Jesus, to have any contact with a Canaanite would be absolute madness. The disciples naturally wanted to send her away. Yet Jesus spoke to her and healed her daughter.

Many are puzzled why Jesus challenged the woman by telling her that he had come to save the lost sheep of Israel, that he had not come to take the children's food and throw it to their houndedogs. The woman replies with incredible bravery and wit: that even the puppies eat the crumbs that fall from the Master's table. Jesus is amazed at her faith and her daughter is healed. Should we be disturbed that Jesus tests her faith? Jesus had not come to heal the followers of Baal. All of his healings had the purpose to deepen the faith of those who followed the one true God, his Father in heaven. For this woman to acknowledge Jesus as Master was a necessary condition to the healing. Jesus was a little hard on her, but he proved to be a good judge of her remarkable character.

The Pharisees fell into the trap of confusing the appearance of righteousness with its reality. They relied on behaviors—praying, fasting, tithing, and washing— to separate the righteous from the unrighteous. Their approach seems sensible—we cannot see into the hearts of others, so we can only judge them by their actions. However, Jesus pointed out that we could look into our own hearts and be honest about what we see there. We also need to keep in mind that God has no problem looking into our hearts. Again and again, Jesus tried to get the Pharisees to look within to see that God wanted them to be holy in their hearts, not just in their actions. Jesus saw that the Law had become a fence, protecting the Pharisees from seeing their own weaknesses. Moreover, behind that fence many of them were corrupt, rotten to the core.

Jesus tried to save them, as he did the rich man, challenging him to “sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” He challenged them to see holiness in the hearts of the outcast, the poor, the Samaritan, so they could then look honestly in their own hearts and be saved. For God's desire is to “be merciful to all.” Jesus wants to be merciful to

us also. We too have our shortcoming and blind spots, just like the Pharisees. We too are taken in by appearances and are sometimes more concerned with looking good and acting good than with being good. We would be better off if we were more honest about the shortcomings of our hearts. If we saw ourselves as not much more than a puppy begging Jesus for scraps, we might be more ready to receive his mercy and grace. Amen.

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