

Matthew 15 [10-20] 21-28

I know some of you read Barbara Brown Taylor's book *Holy Envy* in book study a few years back. "Holy envy" is about admiring or even envying the practices and qualities of other faith traditions while continuing to stand firmly in our own. For me personally, one of the grounds for holy envy is the great rabbinic tradition of Judaism in the Common Era, defining, analyzing, interpreting, and sometimes arguing about the Law as it applies to human life.

As an example, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg talks about the commandment—which also part of the Christian tradition, of course—to honor one's father and mother. Ruttenberg lays out at some length how this commandment has been interpreted in Jewish law. For example, the 2nd-century Tosefta says: "What exactly are the obligations of the son towards the father? Giving food and drink, dressing and sheltering, escorting in and out, and washing his face, feet, and hands." So, very specific, concrete actions.

Further, the Talmud states that if one's mother or father asks them not to perform a commandment or a good deed, they don't have to listen. Rulings from the 14th and 16th centuries maintain the commandment does not mean you have to give up your legal rights or edit your life choices. The final quotation is from a contemporary Orthodox writer, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, who says, "in instances of parents who have physically or sexually abused their children, I believe that children do not owe the parents respect or anything else for that matter."

Now I'm not even going to pretend that I am an expert on Jewish law and its interpretation, but the rabbi is saying that this commandment, which has sometimes been used as a "clobber verse" in Christian circles, comes with very specific limitations. The rabbinic tradition descends in a straight line from the Pharisees. And that tradition is precisely about understanding the spirit of the law as it applies to human behavior: It is a good and beautiful thing to honor one's parents, and/but here's how that might look in actual, messy practice.

This is not the central point of my sermon today, but it's still an important one. Jesus positions himself in the long line of rabbis parsing the finer points of the law, and the fact that he disagrees with the Pharisees in some cases does not alter

this. Contrary to many Christian interpretations, Jesus does not stand against the law. In Matthew 5, he says, “Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” He is standing in this same tradition when he says, “the sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the sabbath.” Jesus’ understanding of the Law and God’s reason for giving the Law is that it exists to benefit human beings and enrich their relationship to the divine, and it should be interpreted in that light—just as any good rabbi would do.

He is standing in this same tradition as our Gospel reading begins today. In the first section, my pastor friend Martin likes to point out, Jesus makes a poop joke.

But the poop joke is not just gratuitous humor. Jesus and his followers have just received criticism for failing to wash their hands before eating. We don’t know why they didn’t wash their hands. Maybe water was at a premium. Maybe they used hand sanitizer instead. The injunction to wash, however we in the germophobic 21st century understand it, is not in *written* Torah, and Jesus places the demands of hospitality over and against the demands of tradition that a guest should wash their hands.

Whatever goes into your mouth, he says, eventually comes out again by another route. If you make a mistake about what you eat, well, it won’t go on your permanent record, so to speak. On the other hand, what comes out of our mouths, namely speech, defiles us if the heart is not clean. From out of the heart, he says, come evil intentions, and then he cites literally all the rest of the commandments pertaining to how we treat each other and talk about each other.

This isn’t hard to understand. In fact, for most Christians it’s become almost a truism. We echo, “It’s the spirit of the law, not the letter of the law,” but, OK, isn’t it true that we say this most frequently when it’s convenient for us to break the letter of the law and reroute what we think the spirit of the law might be? At the very same time we love to hide behind the letter of the law when we think it works in our favor.

Nowhere is this more pernicious—or more common—than in the decisions we make about who is and is not welcome in God’s church. Sure, it may not be right

up there in the by-laws or the mission statement, but when the council member speaks up with an unpopular view, when the person of another race turns around to pass the peace, when the lesbian moms approach the church about having their baby baptized, many Christians seem to know how to offer a cold shoulder while still telling themselves, “We welcome everybody!”

Of course that has not been my experience with Bethesda and Immanuel, but I have many friends who have experienced these things in one congregation or another.

That is why it is a particularly brilliant move to follow up this discussion with the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman. Because it is impossible not to see this narrative as connected to, as commentary on, the first part.

Canaan is sort of a catch-all term in the Hebrew Bible for people who are “not us.” It can refer to Philistines, Moabites, Edomites, Phoenicians—very often the foils or the bad guys but, on rare occasions, individuals of great bravery or virtue. Ruth is a Canaanite, for example. Bystanders believe the Canaanite woman has no “right” to approach Jesus, but she does it anyway, calling him *by name* as the Davidic Messiah.

Jesus’ response is completely lawful, completely in-bounds according to the letter of the law: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

But I think every parent knows how parent-love can make you braver and humbler and more persistent than you would ever be on your own behalf, and so the woman gets on her knees and asks again, “Lord, help me.”

It’s not one hundred percent clear what Jesus is doing here, and commentators have been arguing about it for most of the time since. Is he testing her? Is he caught “with his compassion down”? Or is he demonstrating to his followers—in a visceral way—his earlier point about what the Law is for? “It is not fair,” he tells her, “to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

What can the disciples make of this? They have just recommended sending her away. Calling Canaanites dogs was a common insult, and calling a woman a female dog carries approximately the same tone as if you shouted the same word

in a high school locker room today. Are they thinking to themselves, “Yeah, Jesus. You tell her!”?

Remember, though, Jesus has just been talking about food and the law, food and hospitality and the law. It does not seem likely that he has been struck by amnesia and completely forgotten his claim that “what enters the stomach goes out into the sewer and is washed away. But what goes out of the mouth comes from the heart, and this is what defiles.” Maybe this is a set-up, not for Jesus, not for the woman, but for Jesus’ followers.

Because next the woman gets what is easily the best line in the story: “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” Whatever stereotypes about her the disciples are carrying in their heads, she absorbs the insult with apparent humility—she turns the other cheek so to speak—and still manages to maintain her dignity and her purpose. By the time Jesus delivers the coup de grace, “Woman, great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish,” his point is completely made. This is not about food. This is about the healing of the nations.

The Law is a great container that shapes and orders human life. Just as water outside of a bowl or a bottle goes anywhere and everywhere, without shape or purpose, people without the law are dissipated and pointless. Jesus’ concern here, though, is that we not become so obsessed with the shape or the material of the water bottle that we forget the source of life it contains.

Like the waters of baptism, like the everflowing stream of righteousness that roll down in the book of Amos, God’s mercy rains down on everyone, on the just and the unjust. God’s love enfolds and welcomes all. No exceptions. Thanks be to God. Amen.