

The Best Response is Flawed
[written in oral form]

Matthew 15:10-28
Proper 16, Year A

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I do not understand religions that have strict rules for behaviour, and this includes Old Order Mennonites.

I realize that such demands are a strong glue for community bonding, yet that makes for an exclusive group.

Demanding shared behaviour and beliefs are not welcoming attributes.
And, obeying such regulations seems to breed an attitude of pompous, self-righteous superiority.

Again, an unwelcoming message.

The apology is following such rigid codes are pleasing to God.
The obedient are striving to be right and pleasing to God, I am told.
Yet, there is a BIG problem with purity and perfection.

Moreover, the prophets and Jesus were clear that God does not want such obedience to rules.
The Bible is clear that God loves hospitality, acceptance, grace, peace, and love.

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In verses 10-20 of Matthew 15, Jesus boldly criticized the religious leaders for demanding and obeying such rules for behaviour / for Purity.

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Things were getting dicey. The ruling elite and religious leaders were aggressively going after Jesus now.

They were building a case against Jesus and felt emboldened because Herod had just killed John the Baptist without suffering consequences.

That's a bit like selling parts of the greenbelt to developers.

The Sadducees and Pharisees cornered Jesus and demanded to know why he and his followers did not follow the purity laws.

Originally, many of the purity laws and legal customs were based on sound reasons.
However, over time, they were embellished and altered to fit their needs.

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Before Jesus answered their question, he quoted the prophet Isaiah.  
"These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines."

It is one thing to call people hypocrites. It is quite another thing to attack their treasured customs and laws—their religion.

But that is what Jesus did in verses 10-20

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That religion had a lot of purity laws and rituals, that no doubt, seemed very natural and easy for the affluent leaders to follow.

They had been doing them all their lives.

And like any habit, following those customs made them feel good.

Obedying the rules showed they were pure and good, regardless of how healthy their relationship with God was.

As I said, there is a problem with being perfect and pure.

Also, those who could not or did not follow the rules were considered impure—not so good.

That regard is not welcoming and inviting.

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Jesus attacked aspects of their religion—the purity laws that they held dear.

Jesus asserted, “It is Not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but rather what comes out that defiles”—what comes out from one’s soul.

Needless to say, his statements caused some indigestion for the religious leaders.... and for Jesus’ followers.

His disciples could not believe what they were hearing, and tactfully asked Jesus to reconsider.

Jesus repeated his condemnation in a more caustic way.

The disciples were shocked and dumbfounded. They assumed Jesus must be telling a parable that they did not understand.

Jesus bluntly said it was not a parable, and he continued to hammer away his message against purity rules, elitism, and being exclusive.

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Jesus exposed some of the barriers his religion had in place, and many of them were comfortable, “feel good” traditions.

Attacking those trademark customs was not well received.

Those rules nurtured their community, yet judged others and were not welcoming to outsiders.

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We have an excellent Welcome Statement that lists conditions that will not alter our welcome and acceptance.

It is fine to set high standards, to have lofty goals, and to affirm noble causes,...if we are actively, striving to reach them.

Such an honourable pursuit requires self examination that leads to change and growth.

There is a big difference between an accepting welcome statement and people feeling safe and comfortable with us.

For ex., our church is very physically accessible, except for this stage area. [ ] What message is this neglect saying?

\*We need a ramp to the stage.

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A strong, close community tends to struggle at being truly inviting to outsiders.

I know the “Mennonite game” is fun, yet it feels exclusive to non-ethnic Mennonites.

Also, I think we present as polished and professional.

How does that make those feel who struggle with anxiety, depression, insecurity, and other issues?

We tend to act like “We got it together”.

I promise you, No One in this church has “got it all together.”

We are all flawed, and that is good.

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To be sure, every community or society has its quirks and cherished assumptions.

For example,

people from other countries, find it ironic that “In God we trust” is printed on American coins.

Around 1900, there was a movement to have that phrase removed.

The influential millionaire, Carnegie, was a strong advocate for retaining the statement. He shared his opinion with Mark Twain, and told Twain that the words are a joy to say and proclaim.

Twain replied, “You are right. I do not think that phrase would sound any better if we believed it.”

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Back to Jesus. That has a nice ring to it, too. []

Jesus had made some very strong statements.

And what Jesus says is Gospel,.....right?

Even so, he thought it prudent to go away and hide for awhile.

They went a LONG way away, to the area of Tyre and Sidon, which is on the coast of Phoenicia, Syria.

If you look at your New Testament map in the back of your Bible, you’ll see that it is nearly off the map.

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*Oh,....that’s right....bringing Bibles to church is no longer one of our habits. Ummm?*

Anyway, that region is way beyond the Jewish domain. Jesus and his followers were in a foreign land.

While there, he was confronted by a loud woman.

Matthew used the archaic, derogatory label “Canaanite” in reference to her.

The Canaanites were defeated by the Hebrews, and the Israelites were occupiers on their land.

That label is similar to one of us calling a First Nations person an Indian.

Mark, in his version, called the woman a Syrophenician Greek. Matthew revealed his prejudice.

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The “loud”, obnoxious woman yelled at Jesus, “Have mercy on me Lord, son of David, my daughter is tormented by a demon.”

She was polite, respectful, and reverent in her address to Jesus.

Regardless, she was a “low-life” to them and worse, she had a child with demons.

Like we do to obnoxious beggars and panhandlers, Jesus ignored her.

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In spite of being ignored, she showed a great deal of audacity and tenacity....because she kept yelling at Jesus.

She became an annoying spectacle and the disciples wanted to shoo her away.

Ignoring her did not work, so Jesus responded to her.

He quietly told her, “I am sorry, I cannot help you. You are not on my agenda. You are right about who I am, but my mission is only to heal my people / the “acceptable people.”

*Do you feel the tension here?*

She did not accept that answer, and knelt in front of Jesus, blocking his exit. She pleaded, “Lord, Help Me!”

This time Jesus is more direct with her, and answers,

“Listen, it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs, now, is it?”

This statement is not quite as bad as it sounds in English.

The word Jesus used for dogs means a pet / a cute puppy.

Still, this is demeaning in that it suggests the woman is less valued and under a master.

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Undeterred, the woman boldly confronts Jesus, and Jesus, like the Pharisees in the previous section, is the one who has to contend with what he declares and affirms.

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Jesus was faced with his own hypocrisy!!

**Isn’t the Bible great? It painfully presents the truth.

Here we have Jesus blatantly being educated and illuminated by a foreigner.

He is exposed just as he exposed the Pharisees.

WOW

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In her response, the woman cleverly changed the “puppy dog” word for a word that means a street mutt.

She wanted to cogently expose Jesus’ prejudice and his exclusive attitudes.

She petitions, “Yes, Lord, even the Mutts eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.”

>Ouch<

In modern words, “Even the Indians are allowed to use the food pantry.”

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This was likely a gut-wrenching epiphany for Jesus.

Jesus was flawed.

Jesus was not so pure.

This confrontation helped him to realize his hidden prejudice.

Jesus proclaimed inclusiveness, yet his bias and prejudice presented an exclusive message in this situation.

No doubt, Jesus was a loving and accepting person, yet his culture had conditioned him. Nevertheless, the “Canaanite” woman recognized the love in him and believed in his passion for justice.

She had faith in Jesus that he would change and become fully accepting of her.

She did Not give up on him, and her faith that Jesus would change was rewarded.

Jesus did change, and her daughter was healed.

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This passage shows that Jesus was flawed.

Jesus was NOT pure, and this is very good.

Because there is a big problem with perfection and purity.

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A couple of weeks ago, I had the good fortune to vacation in Newfoundland.

We visited the West Brook Pond which is an inland fjord in Gros Morne National Park.

The fjord became separated from the ocean when the land rebounded from the weight of the continental glaciers.

The fjord is surrounded by massive cliffs that are over 600 metres tall, higher than the CN Tower.

The fjord is 165 metres deep.

It is fed by water that flows over sterile, exposed granite rocks.

There are a number of beautiful waterfalls.

The most amazing feature is that the water in the fjord is pure.
It is classified as ultraoligotrophic.
Also, the ions in the water are so few that the water cannot conduct electricity.

The water is as pure as pure can be.
It is sterile.
As I said, there is a big problem with perfection and purity.

Nothing lives in the water. There are no fish or plants.
There are no nutrients.
There are no birds around the fjord because there is nothing to eat.
The water is so pure that it is not alive.

This is a simile for ontological purity.

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Life grows from impurities, from imperfections, from messiness.  
What we may find distasteful, undesirable, such as bacteria are actually the nutrients for  
growth / for life—for love.

Being flawed / impure is Not the problem.  
If anything, it is life giving. Perfection cannot be loved.  
Flaws / impurities are food for growth.

How we respond and live with the impurity is what can be life saving and life giving.

Jesus faced, embraced his flaw, and he grew and changed.  
He received the woman and healed her daughter.

From his impurity there was growth and new life.

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I have learned that some of the most beautiful, most loving, and gracious people would
consider themselves deeply flawed.
This is of no surprise.
The perceived impurity is nourishment for the soul and is life giving for others.

Maybe it simply makes one humbly honest.
I think that condition opens the soul in a very tender way.
The opening lets the love pour out and in.

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So,  
May a persistent person inform you that all are welcome because we are all flawed.

We are all impure.

We are all in need of acceptance, grace and love.

From our response hymn,  
The music in the air comes from life bubbling up from nourishing impurities.

There is a God somewhere, and is usually found nurturing and redeeming life in the brokenness.

And it may sound like an obnoxious person who does not give up on you.....or.... you, not giving up with someone else.

We try to follow the way of Jesus, ...so  
Listen and learn as Jesus did.