

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
To be delivered on August 20, 2017	On the occasion of the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 15A

Matthew 15:10-28

### Oppose Hate with Love

There are two parts to today’s Gospel. The first part is optional; in your printed lectionary insert it appears in green brackets. The second part is what follows. In the first part, Jesus responds to the charge from the Pharisees that his disciples are defiling themselves by eating without first washing their hands. In the second part, Jesus has a rather unusual interaction with a Canaanite woman.

The charge from the Pharisees that Jesus’ disciples are doing something wrong by not washing their hands before they eat is based not on the Scriptures but on the traditions of the elders. It’s a fair point, though not a strong one. Jesus counters their complaint by pointing out a spiritual truth, that it is not what one puts into one’s mouth, as in what one eats, that is the most important thing, but rather it is what comes out of one’s mouth, as in what one says, that truly matters. He rightly points out that, “what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and that is what defiles.”

Our words can defile us. If we speak words of love, kindness, and generosity, those words are a blessing to us and to all those who hear them. But if we speak words of hate, oppression, and violence we not only defile ourselves, but everyone who hears. By the same token, if we do not oppose words of hate, if we fail to speak a counter word, then we consent to our own defilement.

Last week in Charlottesville there were a lot of defiling words being shouted. There were, however, many present to stand and speak against them. Among them was a group of clergy, including our bishops. This was a group organized by the local clergy of Charlottesville,

who also sent out an ecumenical invitation. They intended that it would be only clergy, in other words, it was not an open invitation to all church members. Not that they wanted to exclude parishioners, but they were attempting to keep some semblance of control over *how* they opposed the hate groups and their defiling words. They were there to represent peace and love, just as Jesus has commanded us. They were there to counter hate with a faithful witness to God's love for all.

The Canaanite woman was to Jesus a foreigner, an outsider, a person not included in God's covenantal love for the children of Israel. His words were not exactly welcoming or encouraging to the woman who was begging for mercy and for Jesus to cast out the demon that was tormenting her daughter. First he said to his disciples, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Then he said to her directly, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Harsh words for someone who just finished saying that it is what comes out of one's mouth that defiles. Though his disciples wouldn't have thought Jesus' comments unusual, and I'm not sure if the Canaanite woman would have been offended either. That's just the way it was. Everyone understood that Israelites had their God and Canaanites had their gods too.

What was truly unusual was the way Jesus responded to her clever comeback about how even the dogs eat the crumbs under their master's table. He broke the barrier that divided his people from hers. He proclaimed, by healing the woman's daughter of the demon that possessed her, that there is only one people under one God, that all the artificial barriers such as nationality, race, ethnicity, don't apply in God's kingdom.

So what happens when we put these two parts of the Gospel together? What can we make of it in light of recent events and in light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ? This question is even more important when we consider that today we baptize a new Christian. Nathan will become the newest follower of Jesus this morning (at the later service). What message do we want him to get? What message does our Lord have for us this morning? Taken together the two parts of the Gospel reading this morning—Jesus’ point that what comes out of one’s mouth is what defiles, and Jesus breaking down the well established barrier that separated different peoples—underscores for us the need to oppose evil whenever and wherever it arises. It makes me think about the last question in the baptismal covenant: “Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?” In seeking justice, we are called to seek it peacefully. And in seeking peace, we are called to seek it with justice.

I don’t intend to get into the complexities about what happened in Charlottesville last weekend. I won’t opine about Civil War monuments. That’s not what you came here to listen to. But there were people there carrying swastika flags and giving *sig hiel* salutes. That has nothing to do with the Confederacy. Opposing white supremacists and their hateful rhetoric is what all people of good will should be doing. It is what all Christians should be doing, to be true to our own commitment to Christ, and to be an example to Nathan and all our children. We should be doing it peacefully, but with strength and resolve, as that group of clergy did in Charlottesville.

As we baptize Nathan this morning, let us recommit ourselves to building the kingdom of God with words that unite rather than divide, with words and actions of love and peace, with a willingness to oppose those who speak hate and violence, and with the recognition that God has broken down the artificial barriers that we use to separate us.