

## **What Comes Out of Your Mouth**

### **Matthew 15:10—28; Genesis 45:1—15**

Before I forget, I'd like to get something off my chest. So here goes: Whoever said, *'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me,'*—whoever said that— didn't grow up in my neighborhood; and therefore, as far as I'm concerned, didn't know what they were talking about. I prefer, *'If I'm rubber and you're glue, whatever you say bounces off me and sticks to you.'* And yet, even that seems a little too flippant and cavalier. Hypothetically-speaking, if I meet you on the street and call you 'poopy-head,' does that really bounces off of you and stick only to me? I doubt it. On the other hand, what if I can change? What if we change? What if—through our hanging out with Jesus—we *are* changed? And what if, consequently, because of that change of heart, my vocabulary is transformed, and as a result, the conversations that we have here and there and elsewhere become more edifying? I suppose it could happen. I suppose it *has* happened. And yet, the fact is, among us and between us, given that we live in this world, every once in a while, a word escapes the lips and we wish it hadn't.

This morning, in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 15, Jesus isn't using catchy phrases like *'sticks and stones may break my bones'* probably because he understands that malicious gossip about him will eventually lead to his death on a cross. And he isn't subscribing to the image of being *'rubber'* and the rest of us being *'glue'* because, on that cross, according to 2 Corinthians 5:21, Jesus is going to absorb all the evil the world has to inflict. Even so, let's pay attention:

***“Are you still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.”***

Now, in recent weeks, there's been a lot of discussion in the news about the *cyclospora* parasite defiling our lettuce and the bacteria, *salmonella*, defiling our eggs—and how these microscopic hazards have been wreaking havoc with the digestive tracts of thousands of people—and not just those who eat at *Taco Bell*. And we're told not to worry—the *Food and Drug Administration* is on the case and tracking down the origin of the problem. Aren't they? Exactly what is the problem? Back in first century Galilee and Judea the Roman Empire didn't think to utilize their tax revenue to fund an F.D.A.—which left the Jewish people vulnerable to food shortages and sanitation issues. Therefore, in the parlance of the day, it was supposedly up to the gods (in the case of non-Jews) or up to God (in the case of the Jews), as to whether a person would get sick from what they ate. So here come the Pharisees, doing their civic duty by promoting the traditional washing of hands and utensils before every meal. Thank you very much for the public service announcement. Doesn't that take care of the problem? Is there another problem? A deeper problem? A problem with what *comes out the mouth* and not into it?

During the height of the Covid-19 epidemic, not only was there a virus running amok; at *Providence Sacred Heart*, where I worked as a resident chaplain, there were rumors. Words were coming out of the mouths about all the evil nurses and the evil doctors who were experimenting on their loved ones wouldn't allow families to meet face-to-face because they were evil. And since then, I've wondered about the appropriate and inappropriate times, places and circumstances for the use of that word. Do I dare let it come out of my mouth?—do *you* dare?—apply that term to the character of a person or to the essence of a people without considering the possibility that we're wrong? Or without considering the possibility of change?

***“For out of the heart come evil intentions...”*** Jesus says this in verse 19 as the slippery slope that gives way to ***“murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.”*** But do you know what he also says to the thief who hangs next to him in crucifixion? Luke 23:43: ***“Today, you’ll be with me in Paradise!”*** And do you know what he says to the woman caught in the act of adultery in John 8? ***“Woman, where are your accusers?”*** And when none of the men stick around, he says, ***“Neither do I condemn you!”*** You see, it’s one of the greatest ironies of the gospel message:

- those who believe they are evil and beyond the possibility of redemption are not who they seem to be after all; and
- by contrast, those who believe they are the furthest from evil and who try to keep themselves untainted and unspoiled by it are already spoiled and tainted.

In today’s first reading from Genesis 45, the brothers of Joseph are confronted by Joseph, whom they had sold into slavery in Egypt. What they said and did was evil. But is that the end of it?

Listen to how things pan out:

***“And [Joseph] wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it... Then Joseph said to his brothers, ‘Come closer to me.’ And they came closer. He said, ‘I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me here before you to preserve life...”***

Hopefully, amid all the wrongs done to us in our own lives, we can appreciate how this works.

Evil is NOT a co-equal force alongside the Goodness of God and God’s Creation. It’s a twisting or a perversion of the gift of relationship. And so, with any evil intention that arises in the human heart, God’s intention will be to untwist it and to make it right. How do I know?

How can I declare so unequivocally that evil won’t have the last word?

Well, let's ask the Canaanite woman. In the books of Leviticus [18:21] and Deuteronomy [18:10], you and I can read how the original inhabitants of the Promised Land of Canaan had the reputation of doing evil. For hundreds of years the Canaanite people were even accused of sacrificing their own children for the sake of the fertility of their fields and their prowess in making war. And so, having been steeped in this tradition, Jesus himself has developed an opinion. And the opinion appears to have calloused over... and hardened. He says, ***"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel..."*** And he says, ***"It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."*** End of story, right? He's calling her dog. Drop the microphone, right? Well, no!

The Canaanite woman will now speak for herself. She won't settle for being written off by Leviticus and Deuteronomy. She may have the cultural reputation of performing the evil of her ancestors—of not valuing human life; but here she is, crying out on behalf of her own daughter. She says, ***"Lord, help me!"*** And she says, ***"Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."*** Now I don't know how we're supposed to feel about this. Jesus *does* come across as being a little insensitive—or maybe a lot. But what's clear enough is that we can argue with him. We may not be right, but we can argue with him about what the good news means for us. What comes out of the mouth of the Canaanite woman matters—and likewise, what comes out of your mouth and my mouth. And if our words matter, let's not be content with simply labeling or naming or slandering or shaming people for the evil they may or may not have done. Let's wonder about the possibility of Matthew 15:28: ***"Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish..."***

I'll never forget the story I saw on *Dateline* once—of a truck driver who would abduct these little girls and victimize them. He got away with these horrific crimes for years because he was always on the move. And yet eventually he turned himself in. The authorities became curious; they didn't ask him why he had done the evil he had done; they ask him why he turned himself in. That's when he describes how this one child, stood alone, against the backdrop of a starlit sky, and he could hear her muttering words. Words were coming out of her mouth. Not the harsh words to which he had grown accustomed in his childhood and teenage years. Not the curse words and the four-letter epithets. Not words of degradation and disgust. She was praying. She was praying *for him*.