

The Gospel, today, describes two different events, which at first seem quite unrelated. They are unrelated in that each is independent of the other. What is striking, though, when you reflect on this passage from Matthew, is that both reveal the thoughts and teachings of Jesus as radically departing from the Jewish norm of his day. Jesus was a mainstream rabbi by no means. He was not bound to tradition; he was not bound to culture. He was not bound to religious law as man understood it. Our Lord's values, and therefore his teachings were driven by his core values of unconditional love, justice and mercy, because these are the core values of God the Father. The author of 1st John pointed to a theological truth of the greatest significance when he said, "God is love." We cannot understand Jesus, and certainly cannot try to follow in his steps, unless we grasp, as a fundamental of our faith, that the very essence of God is love. Therefore, love, reflected in justice and mercy, is the bedrock of our Lord's life and his teaching.

The first event, described by today's Gospel, is simply a discussion between Jesus and some of his disciples. At issue was Pharisaical offense over Jesus' statement that what comes out of the mouth, not what goes into the mouth is what defiles. The Pharisees heard this as rejection of religious dietary law; as Pharisees, they were sticklers for the law. In Jesus' mind, the dietary laws, as well as the rules for ritual pureness, were secondary to those core principles of love, justice and mercy. One could be perfect in ritual pureness and one could delight in the minute observation of religious law, and still fall far short of the glory of God if love was absent, if there was no yearning for justice and mercy. Jesus agreed, totally, with the Old Testament prophet Micah, that what God required was that we act with justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God. The letter of the law can never outweigh the spirit of the law, and the spirit of the law is God's love, expressed in justice, mercy and humility.

The second event described in today's Gospel is the story of the Canaanite woman who sought God's mercy for her daughter. In and of itself, Matthew's use of the term "Canaanite" is anachronistic in the time of Jesus. The Canaanites were inhabitants of Palestine at the time of the Hebrew migration the Hebrews and Canaanites were in conflict for many years, but this was generations before Jesus. Matthew's description of the woman as a "Canaanite" was a way for him to describe her as the worst of the Gentile "trash." The term can only be understood as a strong racial slur. Matthew's Gospel was written by a Jew for Jewish readers, and on several occasions Matthew tried to make the point that Jesus' real priority was salvation for the Jews – something not supported by the balance of the New Testament. But that which is important, here, is that this woman, scorned by pious people as worthy only of contempt because of her race, is the very person that Jesus embraced as demonstrating great faith, the type of faith that we all should have.

What we learn from the Gospel today is that the Lord looked beyond the superficial to see into the hearts of people. He saw folks for whom they truly were; he examined their values, because your actions can belie your values. One can act righteously, if necessary, in order to impress others, or accomplish a self-serving goal, but ultimately one's values will prove out. Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be, also." What we value determines who we truly are.

If our values are those of Jesus, we will delight in mercy. If our values are those of Jesus, we will be just in all our actions. If our values are those of Jesus, we will love God with all that we are and have, and we will love our neighbor as we love ourselves. *Amen.*