

9 Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 15 – Year A – August 14, 2011
Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Romans 11:1-a, 29-32 Matthew 15:10-28
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The classic holiday movie, *A Christmas Story*, is set in the couple of weeks leading up to Christmas day. The main theme of the story is Ralphie and his obsession over getting a Red Ryder BB gun. As a major subplot, we get a glimpse into the life of the entire family. Ralphie's dad is a colorful character who swears often and with great gusto about everything from his Oldsmobile to his neighbors, the Bumpuses, and their dogs. One of the best scenes is early on Christmas day when disaster strikes. Driven wild by the smell of turkey, the whole pack of Bumpus dogs force their way into the kitchen, and in less time than it takes to say merry Christmas, that turkey is gone. In a decisive moment of redeeming grace, the family experience a new kind of Christmas camaraderie at the local Chinese restaurant.

I think Jesus would have enjoyed sharing the story of the Parker family as a parable. In that one scene alone, the family tradition is extended into uncharted territories. Ironically, it even shows us that the dogs, representing the hated Bumpus neighbors, also get to eat well by the grace of God. Being set at Christmastime, the whole drama unfolds because we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Word made flesh, who opened the way of salvation for all. Not just for the Israelites, but for gentiles, like you and me, as well. The movie shows us just how easy it is to harbor prejudices, and the surprising way that God has of breaking down those exclusive "them and us" boundaries. Breaking down boundaries is the two-fold lesson from today's Gospel reading. In the first story we hear about Jesus' confrontation with a small group of Judean religious leaders on the human-made traditions about purity practices. In the second story, a Canaanite woman badgers Jesus, begging Him repeatedly to heal her daughter. When He doesn't respond, she persists, and Jesus calls her a dog. Both of these stories seem either remote or unreal to us, but realistically, they're not. Simply put, it's not easy to look in the mirror and see how we view our own religious sacred cows, our prejudices, or the subtle ways we exclude others. More often than not we'd prefer to push these images aside with a prideful rationalization, or socially acceptable avoidance. In fact, an honest reflection of who we are is easier to stomach when it's couched in humor, just like the tale of the Parker family from *A Christmas Story*.

When Jesus confronts the Judean leaders, He is talking to His peers, those who are socially acceptable, but nonetheless missing the mark in matters of spiritual importance. For you and me it's about understanding the difference between traditions that build up and support our lives in Christ, helping us to grow in faith, and in our relationships, verses human-made traditions. If we're using tradition for the purposes of spiritual one-upmanship, then we're a long way from building up the Body of Christ. God made us all in His image, and considers us all equal in His sight. At its heart, this kind of misuse of tradition is usually grounded in fear, and even more insidious, it's fueled by a widely held and deeply rooted consumeristic worldview of scarcity. God's love and grace is life-giving and abundant. We'll look at this attitude and God's response, more closely in the mid-year meeting after our ten o'clock service. In the meantime, an honest awareness and understanding of who we are is the first step in making a conscious decision to change, and grow according to God's will. The specific external purity rituals that the Judean leaders were promoting as blind guides of the blind, are not applicable to us today. However, the psychological and cultural indoctrination that promotes this kind of self-righteous behavior are still prevalent in the messages of our world. It's akin to the class system, highlighted in the social commentary of George Orwell's book, *Animal Farm*, where we're all created equal, but somehow some become more equal than others. It's like the way the world grooms us to judge others by profession, what kind of car we drive, which neighborhood we live in, the color of our skin, our gender, or our country of origin, to name but a few. There's little point in cringing with guilt, or even denying that any of these are an issue for us. There are times in our lives when we are *all* guilty of sorting, segregating, and excluding others for all kinds of reasons. Although again, it often comes down to fear, or fear of losing something we value. Guilt and

denial merely encourage us to bury our faults and feelings rather seeking God's help to deal with them humbly and honestly. Jesus understands our history, and our motivations. Jesus read the hearts of the Judean leaders, and He knows our hearts intimately. He's ready, willing and eager to forgive us, as we find the courage to seek forgiveness and reconciliation. As Christians, we believe that God in Christ Jesus is already working in us to transform our ungracious attitudes, and redeem our lack of compassion, and divine hospitality.

Before showing us the way, Jesus first has to explain to the disciples that when we say and do things that dishonor God and disgrace ourselves, the problem lies in our hearts. Failing to listen to God or to examine our motivations leads us into trouble, especially through what we say and do. We have spent a lifetime absorbing and spreading the prejudices and biases of our day and age. It's the most natural thing in the world for us to go with the flow, especially when we grow up with it, hear it, read it, and live it for years. But Christ calls us to take the much more difficult path of purposeful and intentional living. That means working to establish God's values in the mess of selfish, humanistic messages, twisted worldly values, and fear mongering.

The twist in the tale comes for Jesus when he encounters the Canaanite woman. We have to understand that in first century Palestine, this woman represents everything that Jesus has been taught to despise and avoid. The Canaanites are foreigners who worship multiple idolatrous gods, with a small "g", and were even know to practice horrendous acts of violence, including human sacrifice. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the Canaanites have been the enemies of God's chosen people. As a faithful Jewish man, Jesus is culturally conditioned to despise idol worshippers, and to avoid speaking with women in public. She is the absolute antithesis of social acceptability. No wonder Jesus refuses to speak to her, at least at first.

We can speculate at length on whether Jesus was having a bad day, not practicing what he preached, or just being mean to this woman. It certainly seems out of character for the Son of God that we know. After all, Jesus is the one who deliberately defies His own religious leaders by hanging out with the demonized and marginalized. He's the one, who in great love and compassion, heals the sick. I suggest that Jesus' initial refusal to listen to the woman's cry reflects her identity. She belongs to a population with a history of continued and repeated refusal to honor God. In other words, because she is a Canaanite and fully indoctrinated by that culture, Jesus appears to assume that she must be, by her own choice, a long way from believing or accepting God's saving love and grace. The woman's language, in calling out to the Son of David, as well as her deference, kneeling before him in a right attitude of worship, denies this assumption. In fact, since Jesus does talk with the woman, and heal her daughter, we can be sure that God's salvation is available to all. Not one person is beyond God's inclusive arms, or God's gracious gift of redemption. Nonetheless, Jesus wants the woman, and us to know that coming to Christ humbly as a disciple is not a matter of cheap grace. God in Christ Jesus does not yield to human manipulation or answer prayers on demand, especially from those who have never desired to be in relationship with Him. Jesus wants us to understand that there is a cost to discipleship. That we too must work towards letting go of the things in life that distance us from God in Christ Jesus. The Gospel story suggests that the Canaanite woman is already well down the road of faithfulness. One of our challenges this week is to consider what our words and actions betray about the state of *our* hearts. The other challenge is to consider what we're holding on to that may have become a barrier to God's grace and healing in our lives. The real Christmas story is God's steadfast love, which comes to us every day. It's made manifest in God's surprising, expansive generosity, redeeming grace, and abundant love. May we all receive God's gifts faithfully, with open hearts and open minds.

Amen.