“Three Strikes and You’re In!”
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Isaiah 56:1,6-8; Romans 11:1-2, 29-32; Matthew 15:10-28
August 14, 2011

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen. The texts for this morning’s message are the lessons for this day.

When I arrived at Concordia Teachers College in Seward Nebraska in the fall of 1973 they had just finished painting the dining hall. It wasn’t just a change in color and hue but the undoing of a long held custom. In an earlier era they had painted “Come Lord Jesus be our Guest…” on the wall and the custom of a large number of students was to simply nod at the wall before they began their meal. When the prayer was covered there were many students deeply upset that their time-saver had been removed. Some actually continued to nod toward the blank wall.

Today’s Gospel begins on that same note, of a custom fiercely defended, long after its time had come and gone. You wouldn’t have known that from the Gospel we just read, but that’s only because the first nine verses that spell it out, were omitted.

“Why,” some scribes and Pharisees complained to Jesus, “do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.” Kindly notice that its not about hygiene, the way our mommas taught us; it was about breaking a tradition made sacred over time. The scribes and Pharisees were experts at that sort of thing and were especially picky about hand-washing. Hands were always washed before eating by having water poured on them. If, however, you were eating part of a sacrifice, you had to dip your hands in the water.

Then there were more rules: from what kind of vessel you could pour the water, from what source you could get the water, whom you allowed to pour the water and so on. For that reason, people had to keep huge supplies of water on hand, stored in 100 gallon jugs that were protected to preserve their purity. Water would be drawn from those jars with a dipper, measuring not less than one and a half eggshells and poured onto hands that had been lifted in to the air as the water was allowed to run down to the wrists. And, if by chance, the water didn’t make it that far—to the wrists, your hands were still officially unclean and you’d have to start all over again.

Now I mention all of that, that’s not even in today’s Gospel because it sets the scene for Jesus’ radical assertion “it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” And then He went on to list them: evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness and slander, to mention just a few.

It was as I said, a radical assertion, a bold break with the past that crashed head-on into a way of thinking that scribes and Pharisees cherished. It’s not just about traditions, good ones, bad ones, any ones. But at the heart of the Gospel, the one we just read, as
well as the entire Good News of Jesus is one critical question: How does anyone get right and stay right with God? That question can be answered only 2 ways—one of which leads to death while the other one leads to life.

The Pharisees thought if you follow enough rules, God will surely notice you and your good behavior and reward you with His favor. For a full 20 years I went out most every Tuesday night knocking on doors making friendly visits on prospective members of the congregations where I served as teacher, pastor, or Outreach Pastor, delinquent members of those congregations or follow-up visits to people who had written to The Lutheran Hour who lived close to those congregations. In a softer version of the “If you die tonight will you go to heaven?” question my partner and I would usually ask people what they thought of Jesus and how they thought people got to heaven. I was pleasantly surprised that most people said, “Jesus is the Son of God” (of course this was the 70’s - 90’s) and not greatly surprised that most said, “well, if you live a good life and don’t kill anyone God will let you in.” That is how people reason – especially Americans who believe “You get what you pay for” and they want to pay for heaven.

In a way, though, the questions lead to that thinking – unless a person has read, learned, inwardly digested and by the Spirit remembers Paul’s word, “By grace you have been saved, through faith, and that not of itself, it is a GIFT from God.” That’s the second way, the way that leads to life with God – faith and trust in God for our salvation through the merits of the Messiah, the Suffering Servant who earned our righteousness: Jesus.

Grace! How often don’t we say that word and then fail to live according to it. I’m not talking about behavior. I’m talking about the trust we imperfect sinners can have in a perfect God who loves us perfectly that we often exchange for rules and judgments and condemnations of those we consider as less or weaker.

What followed all that is a familiar story but in a quite unfamiliar place; familiar because its been told a lot and familiar because, let’s face it, if a woman like that Canaanite floozy were following us, we’d shoo her away too. Who wants to hang out with people like that? What is unfamiliar is the setting. Jesus is as far away from Jerusalem – from Jewish lands – as He will ever get in His ministry. No Pharisees or Sadducees here – they stayed close to the temple. He and the disciples are in a foreign land – Phoenicia/Canaan, an ancient culture that loved their dogs like we do – had pet cemeteries, no less! All the crowds surrounding the disciples would have been foreigners and what they considered inwardly and outwardly vile – no knowledge of the One True God and God’s Laws.

And then there is this local woman - a woman with three strikes against her: she was a woman, (women weren’t allowed to speak to men in public) she was a Canaanite, (one of the tribes, God commanded to be exterminated when Israel entered the Promised Land) and she had a daughter with a demon and everybody knows that demons dirty and defile anyone who comes near them. Each of those by itself was the evidence of uncleanness. Not physically, but spiritually. For the law obsessed religious leaders of that
day and all who were entrapped in their reasoning the woman was polluted beyond repair.

I understand where the disciples were coming from: prejudice and “protecting” Jesus’ reputation by keeping her away. Those within the circle of the church – raised in the faith, enveloped by the body of Christ, nurtured and educated have often looked askance at others – deemed them outside the circle of God’s family and needing to be enlightened not just by the Holy Spirit but by those “in the know” – but these disciples were about to be surprised by strong faith in a most unexpected person. But first, I must admit, I am surprised – surprised at how Jesus treats the Canaanite woman. Why the “silent treatment” or “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Then he calls her a “dog,”—not a cuddly puppy, but a flea-bitten mongrel on the street. With our emphasis on telling people you are a “much loved child and heir of God” this test of faith – identifying her true condition, well, I think it would have driven many a person in the circle of the church away but it did not keep her from being persistent. She kept on shouting “Lord, help me,” which, not coincidentally is something we sing in most of our services, “Lord, have mercy.” Did you know that you were crying for help? It, quite literally, identifies us and our need for mercy with the dogs under the table.

The thing is, there’s plenty of room under that table, room enough for disciples who eat with dirty hands, room enough for a dirty, desperate woman, room for you and me. As the old form of confession said, we are “poor, miserable sinners” who, by grace unimaginable are redeemed, renewed, and made righteous heirs. How marvelous that the Holy Spirit comes with the gift of faith – the strong gift of persistent faith to this woman with three strikes against her.

Even if you don’t watch all 162 games the Twins play each season you know its “Three Strikes and You’re OUT!” but in the case of this brash and out-of-place daring to talk to a man woman who dressed differently, ate different foods, had foreign blood in her veins and the stench and uncleanness of demons clinging to her woman it was “Three Strikes and You’re In!” That’s the Gospel - no matter where we’ve been, no matter what we’ve done, no matter how many strikes you have against you, all it takes is a crumb of grace to bring us into God’s embrace.

Good place to stop – and to go out into the world for another week – knowing you’re in God’s embrace. But I’d like to add a challenge. If you’d like to walk this neighborhood with me in the weeks and months to come – just talk to people, not try to sell them on a program – though we’ll probably give people information about what’s going on here – but just to ask them how they feel about Jesus and heaven - well, let me know, I’d like to have company. I think it’s time for us to get to know our neighbors – not just talk about them as “those people we’d like to come through our doors” but get to know some names, hear their thoughts and not just give them crumbs but invite them to the Feast and celebrate it with them. Amen.
Now may God whose arms reach out in love to embrace everyone who calls upon Him, teach us to love the world with His compassion and to proclaim His name throughout the earth.