

## *Outside In*

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### **Text: Matthew 15:10-18**

Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, 'Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.' Then the disciples approached and said to him, 'Do you know that the Pharisees took offence when they heard what you said?' He answered, 'Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.' But Peter said to him, 'Explain this parable to us.' Then he said, 'Are you also 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.'

### **Isaiah 56:1, 6-8**

Thus says the LORD:

Maintain justice, and do what is right,  
for soon my salvation will come,  
and my deliverance be revealed.

And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,  
to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD,  
and to be his servants,  
all who keep the Sabbath, and do not profane it,  
and hold fast my covenant—  
these I will bring to my holy mountain,  
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;  
their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices  
will be accepted on my altar;  
for my house shall be called a house of prayer  
for all peoples.

Thus says the Lord GOD,  
who gathers the outcasts of Israel,  
I will gather others to them  
besides those already gathered.

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*May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.*

On Friday morning I had a chance to go over to Koerner Hall for one of the sessions of the big Rendez-vous conference that is on this weekend. It is a national gathering of United Church youth and young adults and their leaders, going on this weekend at the university. (That's where Evan is today – she is the social media coordinator, doing all the tweeting and texting and blogging and posting which that entails.) The conference is a huge undertaking, really a first in the church, to do a youth event of this scope. It was a lovely day and a beautiful venue, lots of people, faces familiar and unfamiliar. Some old Bloor Streeters - *young* old Bloor Streeters that is – I bumped into Adam Hanley, and Jenni Leslie, both of whom sent their greetings and spoke fondly of their time here as students. And one of the Conference organizers and MCs is Alydia Smith, a former minister here.

As part of the opening session of the morning Alydia talked about the meaning of the word Rendez-vous. A rendez-vous is a meeting or get-together. Something you show up for. The actual translation of the French word rendez-vous is 'present yourself' and Alydia reflected on the way we sometimes mean present what I want to see, or present the part of yourself I like, or present what I can handle. She encouraged her listeners to understand God's call as an invitation to present ourselves in our wholeness, completely. An invitation to show up.

In the sense Alydia meant, a baptism Sunday is just that kind of rendez-vous. Parents and babies have 'presented themselves' to this particular Christian community and also to the entire faith community, worldwide and through history. Because of the wonderful innocence of the children, we are reminded of what it means to present yourself without guile or pretence. To place yourself trustingly in the hands of others.

In that sense it is the baptismal children who lead. Strictly speaking, it is they who begin as outsiders, brought *in* to the church through baptism. But when we look at them with their openness, their clarity about how they are feeling, and their willingness to learn, we can see that they are consummate insiders, when it comes to what Jesus called the Kingdom of God.

There is an element of this irony in the Gospel story today. The second part is about a rendez-vous. The Canaanite woman just presents herself. Here I am she says, I need your help for my daughter. And really, she is saying to Jesus, *rendez-vous*.

Interesting to see how the writer of the Gospel of Matthew underlines and highlights the irony of this rendez-vous by placing the story where he does. Side by side, we see two brief encounters. In the first, Jesus is talking to the insiders. His disciples anxiously inform him that his remarks about ritual washing have offended the religious leaders. And Jesus says hah, blind guides. Don't pay any attention to that. It doesn't really matter whether you follow the formalities of the tradition. Doesn't matter what you eat or drink, whether you wash your hands in the prescribed way. Doesn't matter how you present yourself superficially. What matters is the truth of who you are. Your honesty, your integrity. Eating a piece of unblest bread won't do the kind of damage that evil intentions or murder or theft or unfaithfulness do.

What wonderful irony then, that immediately after saying this, Jesus finds himself in a situation which tests the practical meaning of his words. The quintessential outsider approaches – she is a woman, not clearly under the protection of a man, always a dubious condition. She is a member of a despised ethnic group, historically an enemy. She is the mother of a child who is tainted with mental illness. She is the definition of beyond the pale. When she calls out to him, he doesn't even respond. She persists though, and makes herself quite annoying, distracting them from their important work, so the disciples urge him to send her away.

At first Jesus tries to stick to the program, that is, his original mission to the Jewish people of Palestine. Perhaps he's been listening to the management gurus about staying focused, and keeping the main thing the main thing. No mission drift for him. But the mission does drift – indeed, it shifts definitively at this moment.

For if what really matters is integrity, then on what basis can you restrict your healing and preaching work to the particular community of Israel? If adherence to the outward practices of a specific religious tradition is less important than the spirit of truth within, then how can your mission be limited? She puts it much more colourfully, of course – even the dogs can have the scraps from the children’s table! When it comes to understanding the point of what he keeps saying, *she* is the insider, not a foreigner at all.

We can imagine that Jesus stops and looks at her for a moment, barely taking in what he has heard. What is outside may be odd clothing and an abrasive manner, but what is inside is her faith. She has ‘presented herself’ in her wholeness, and has demanded that he do the same. *Woman, great is your faith!* he says. *May it be done for you as you wish!* And in the grand tradition of stories of Jesus, we are told that in his attentive and affirming presence, the child was made whole.

Well that’s a good ending for the story. But the issue is still with us. The question of who is inside and who is outside – and how we know, and what we do about it – is perennial for the church. It isn’t something you can just ‘solve’.

The question about outsiders and insiders is perennial partly because it is so easy to close the circle, and become self-satisfied. But it is perennial also because the answer keeps shifting as our context changes. What is outside moves inside and we find ourselves turned in new directions.

We never cease to be newcomers in the community of faith. We are called to adopt a posture of neophyte, to place ourselves with the children baptised here this morning. We are called to a rendez-vous. Like the people of Jerusalem that Don read about, we are always facing the task of integrating and reintegrating the new with the old, the outside with the inside. Like them we need to blend cultures, languages, religious practices and spiritual expectations to become a healthy living community.

Like Jesus, we are called to learn something new, again and again.

And for this we thank God. Amen.