



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Second Sunday in Lent, February 28th, 2010

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

The apostles were a decidedly odd lot – in a number of instances not at all the sort of people good god-fearing people would invite to dinner. To be sure, among their number were wealthy, cultivated, well-educated people like John and his brother James. But the group also included less savory types: former terrorists like Judas Iscariot and Simon Zelotes, and a particularly despicable retired tax collector, collaborator and traitor to the nation called Matthew.

No surprise, then, that Jewish religious leaders, attorneys and opinion makers were shocked to find the man who fitted all of the prophetic qualifications to be hailed as the long-expected Messiah hanging out this oddly assorted and much less than respectable bunch. It would be a bit like the Archbishop of Canterbury or the Pope riding out with a motorcycle gang and taking part sit-ins and demonstrations as Ivy League Colleges.

Indeed, the Gospels record a number of occasions when folks from the religious establishment took Jesus to task about the people he let into his entourage. And, as it happens, shortly before the event described in today's Communion Gospel, a group of Pharisees and canon lawyers from Jerusalem had done just that.

“Why do your disciples flout the laws and customs of our religion?” they asked him. “They

don't even do something as basic as wash their hands before eating.”

It was an important question. Observation of the Mosaic dietary and hygiene laws was a fundamental expression of Jewish piety. For religious Jews to fail to wash their hands would be like a Christian clergy omitting to say grace before a meal.

Jesus swiftly cut them down to size – telling them that they were not merely pots calling the kettle black, but that their offences against the law were infinitely worse than failing to wash your hands before eating.

“God commanded you to honor you father and your mother, and said anyone who curses his mother and father deserves to die,” he said, “But you guys let people use bogus religious vows as an excuse for evading their divinely ordered responsibility to support their parents financially and materially. You make the law of none effect by your customs.

“You are just a bunch of hypocrites. You are precisely the sort of folk the Prophet Isaiah was denouncing when he said: ‘The people draw near me with their mouths, and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are very far from me. They worship me in vain by teaching doctrine that aren't the commandments of God, but, rather, the commandments of men.’ ”

Then he turned to the crowd of on-lookers and said: “Listen, and try to understand what I’m saying: It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of it.”

Surprisingly, perhaps, the disciples – the very people Jesus had defended – were distressed about the way he had treated the Pharisees. They were hoping to make political allies out of them. Instead Jesus had driven them away. “You’ve really offended them,” they complained.

Jesus replied: “Every plant that has not been planted by my heavenly Father will be rooted up. Stay away from these guys. They are the blind leaders of blind people – and if the blind lead the blind both will fall into the ditch.”

Now you might imagine that after this exchange, the disciples might have learned something. But not a bit of it. Matthew tells us immediately after this episode, they all set off on a preaching tour of the area around Tyre and Sidon. These cities were in Lebanon across the border with the Holy Land. Major Jewish communities were located there and the disciples hoped Jesus’ message would make a large number of converts to his cause.

Shortly after they crossed the border, they were approached by a woman, who was ethnically a Canaanite – a people who were traditionally the most bitter enemies of the Jewish people. Jews of the day hated Canaanites even more fervently than they hated Samaritans. She followed the party, pleading with Jesus to cure her daughter who was possessed by a devil. “Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David,” she cried, “My daughter is grievously vexed with a devil.”

Helping Canaanites in no way advanced the disciples program of making Jesus the spiritual and secular ruler of the Jewish people and, but of course, themselves as top members of his administration. “Get rid of her!” they urged him, “She’s making a scene. She’s an embarrassment.”

Jesus replied with words that absolutely stunned them, but which were implicit in his exchange with the Pharisees. “Don’t imagine,” he said, “

that I have been sent to minister solely to the lost sheep of the Jewish people.” But he decided to use the incident for what our President is apt to call a “teaching moment.” He spoke to her in exactly the way that rabbis generally spoke to gentiles.

“It’s not right,” he told her, “to take the children’s food and feed it to dogs.” (His statement was not quite as nasty as it sounds, because he didn’t actually use the word “dogs” but softened the effect of it by using the term “little puppies.”) The woman simply replied: “True, Lord. But even dogs lick up the crumbs that fall from their masters’ tables.”

It was a display of the most extraordinary respect and humility – indeed, the sort of respect and humility the disciples rarely showed him themselves. “Woman, great is thy faith,” Jesus told her admiringly, “Be it unto thee even as thou wilt.”

The point that Jesus was making to his disciples – and, of course, to us – is that our faith is pointless unless we express our love of God in our love for our fellow men. Too often we get caught up in relatively unimportant details that distract us from the centrality this message to our salvation.

All too often we forget that when asked the meaning a purpose of the law, Jesus summarized it as follows: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one Lord. And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind and with all thy strength. This is the first commandment. And the second it like, namely this: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Put another way, the point Jesus was making to his disciples was that sooner or later we need to put the faith we have been studying into practice. *AMEN*

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.