

DO YOU UNDERSTAND?

August 14, 2011

We had a great week at Family Camp at Moon Beach – our sixteenth consecutive year – and it was a great week. The folks there have become old friends, almost like family for those of us who keep coming back year, after year, after year. And the ones who don't come: well, we missed them.

Among those who didn't come this year was Laura. Laura didn't come because, instead of being at Moon Beach for Family Camp, she is in the Peace Corps in Guatemala. Laura wasn't there, so we wrote her postcards and mailed them off, and her mother had a report. The report about Laura's work in Guatemala is interesting, and you have to have a strong stomach to listen to it, so brace yourselves! In the part of Guatemala where Laura is working, the Guatemalans really don't have any comprehension of sanitation. They don't know what bacteria and viruses are so, in their outhouses, they deal with their used toilet tissue by stacking it in the corner of the outhouse. That's just what they do. Laura is working very hard to introduce them to germ culture to help them to understand that this isn't the very best thing they could do with their used toilet tissue. And, she's making progress because now, in the corners of their outhouses, she is giving them covered cans to contain their used tissue. But they just don't understand.

DO YOU UNDERSTAND?

You know, understanding is one of those quests that are basic to our human spirit and, especially in our age, understanding for us perhaps is most challenging when it comes to technology. Do you remember when your biggest technological challenge was setting the VCR for your favorite soap opera or sitcom? That used to be a challenge. But we've moved on. Now, there are those smart phones – and I'm not sure if it's the phones that are smart or the folks who finally figure out how all the features work – and computers, and tablets, and Kindles, and all of that stuff.

DO YOU UNDERSTAND?

Do you understand today's politico-economic world? Do you understand it? Have you gotten your arms around it? Or are you like me and so many of us who really don't get how complicated it is, and how interwoven the world economies are, and how delicate the political balance is in our world. So I, and maybe you, yearn for simple understandings and simplistic answers. And we get those, don't we, from our politicians: answers that are simple, and simplistic, and oftentimes short-sighted, and many times self-interested, and sometimes even mean-spirited.

DO YOU UNDERSTAND? DO YOU UNDERSTAND?

Sometimes that question goes beyond technique and manipulation, beyond VCRs and smart phones, beyond the politico-economic realities of our current life. Sometimes it goes to really big issues – this business of understanding – to what life is and what it means. Do you understand? One of the great sea changes in understanding in the Western World is when we figured out that this earth of ours is round, not flat. That's a big understanding. And the foundations of the earth were shaken when it was announced that the center of the universe is the sun, not the earth. The church, especially, had trouble with that one. And then there is that

whole business of the scientific method based on this notion, this very simple notion that helps us to understand everything, called cause and effect. There was a day, you know, when we humans didn't understand that every effect has a cause.

DO YOU UNDERSTAND? DO YOU UNDERSTAND?

Jesus in His ministry is taking on a really big issue of understanding today. It's an issue of understanding for the religious community from whence He came and to whom He ministered. And that understanding that Jesus is taking on is the Holiness Code. What makes us holy, and wholly acceptable to God? And the popular, prevailing notion that Jesus was confronting is this notion that holiness is about what we take into our bodies. It's about consumption. That's why there are dietary laws. That's why there are rituals about how we live; because of what we take in to our bodies...and what we take in or what we don't is what makes us holy. You know the old cliché: *I don't smoke, and I don't chew, and I don't go with girls who do.* That's holiness by consumption.

Jesus, on the other hand, says this:

It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth that defiles. (A revolutionary notion.) 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. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.

The Pharisees were furious because, you see, the Pharisees were invested in this intake theory of holiness. They had no use for an output holiness theory. They had been teaching this intake theory of holiness for all of their lives, and now this new teaching from Jesus threatens their world, their power, and their authority. And they're furious.

But they're not the issue today. There's something even more important that Jesus takes on, even more central and significant than this intake or output holiness business. It's something that Jesus had been trying to teach His disciples from the very beginning when He called them away from their nets and their boats on the shore of the Sea of Galilee...something that they simply could not comprehend...something that they refused to understand. And this thing that Jesus was trying to teach them is simply this: **Holiness is not about who you are.** It's not about your pedigree. It's not about your parents. It's not about your family. It's not about your nationality. It's not about who you are.

And the disciples simply couldn't hear it because, you see, the disciples had an exclusive, elite world view. They believed that God is only interested in the chosen few, and they knew for certain that the chosen few belonged to the nation of Israel. Maybe you remember two chapters ago and two weeks ago when the children came to Jesus and the disciples said: **Would you send them away?** Today, a Canaanite woman comes to Jesus. What do the disciples say about her? **Send her away!**

Well, here's her story. This Canaanite woman has a daughter, and the daughter is possessed by a demon that is making her very, very, very miserable and sick. So the woman comes to Jesus and

she says to Him: *Have mercy on me, Son of David!* A Canaanite, acknowledging the royal authority of an Israelite: it was amazing! *Have mercy on me, Son of David!* And even with that self humiliation that this woman engaged in, Jesus didn't even give her notice.

But she persisted. And the disciples said: *Send her away. She keeps shouting after us! Jesus, she's bothering us. Get rid of her.* And then Jesus said something that knocks the pins out from under us and confirms exactly the disciples' sentiment. He said: *You know, I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.* But the woman still persisted. She said: *Lord, help me.* And then Jesus says...if that business about the lost sheep of the house of Israel wasn't enough... He says: *It's not fair to take the children's food and to throw it to the dogs. Not only are you not a child of the household of Israel, says Jesus, you are a mutt.* But the woman persisted: *Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.* And, in response, the Jesus we thought we knew says: *Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.*

Does that passage bother you? Does it make you angry, and queasy, and uncomfortable, and not sure you want Jesus to be your friend? How could Jesus call this woman whose daughter was suffering a dog? It is, I think, one of the most disappointing stories in all of scripture; at least on the surface. But here's what I think is really going on. You see, what I think is happening is that Jesus is getting absolutely nowhere with His disciples so, instead of objecting to their exclusive, elite perspective about God and about people, He just takes on their perspective. He adopts it. And He takes a big risk because, you see, I think what Jesus is doing in this story is that He's trusting the Canaanite woman. And His trust is not betrayed because, with her faith, she teaches Jesus' disciples the lesson that Jesus can't. Jesus takes on His disciples' exclusive and elite perspective...even though He doesn't believe it. He takes a chance on the Canaanite woman, and she comes through! Oh, yes. *Woman, great is your faith!* And Jesus is right about one thing, you know: His business is saving the lost sheep of the house of Israel...that day, His disciples! Those are the ones He was saving.

DO YOU UNDERSTAND?

The only thing that Joseph's brothers understood was jealousy and hate because their father, Jacob, liked their brother, Joseph, better than the rest of them. They betrayed their brother and almost left him for dead. They'd forgotten about that. It was years ago and they assumed that Joseph was long gone, and maybe that he was dead by now. But then a famine grabbed their homeland by the throat, and so they went to Egypt that seemed to have plenty of food so that they might survive. And there, in charge of Pharaoh's whole household, who did they find? Their brother Joseph! It was their worst nightmare. You can just hear Joseph, can't you: *I'm back!*

Surely Joseph was going to get his revenge! Surely he would do to them what they wanted to do to him. But instead, he welcomed them, and he embraced them, and he wept tears of joy over them. Joseph's brothers only understood revenge. But Joseph had embraced redemption.

DO YOU UNDERSTAND? DO YOU UNDERSTAND?

Bob Thelin was born in Foochow, China. He was the son of Presbyterian missionaries. As a young adult at a worship service at a Methodist church in Gettysburg, South Dakota, Bob Thelin

had the same experience that John Wesley did. His heart was strangely warmed. And he applied to be a missionary; a missionary with the United Church Board of World Ministries. Bob Thelin was a UCC missionary in agriculture and development in Africa with the United Church of Christ for 37 years.

In his work, he visited an especially isolated village in Ghana. And, in that village, most of the villagers were sick because their water supply was contaminated – a contaminated stream where they got their water that wasn't fit to drink. The chief of the village was so sick that he couldn't stand. He was infested with parasites in his legs that swelled up to five times their normal size. Bob Thelin got medicine for that village. He got medicine for the chief and all his people. And then he got a well dug for that village; a well that supplied good, safe drinking water. And he thought his work was done.

But several months later he went back to visit the village and he found that the same situation had occurred in the village that greeted him the first time. The chief couldn't move; his legs were swelled up five times their size. And he asked them what they had done; what was going wrong. Weren't they getting water from the well? And they said no. They weren't getting water from the well. All their ancestors had gotten water from the stream. And if the stream was good enough for the ancestors, it was good enough for them.

And so Bob got medicine, and he explained again to them the importance of the well. These villagers thought that disease is caused by evil spirits and that it's punishment for misbehavior. They didn't have a clue about a scientific world view, so they didn't understand.

But after Bob came the second time, what they did begin to understand was that Bob cared about them. And so they changed their water source. They began to use the well, not because all of a sudden they got degrees in science, but because they came to trust and to understand that Bob Thelin loved them, and they would do this because of that love.

DO YOU UNDERSTAND?

Do you understand that holiness is about how we live, and give, and love? Do you understand? Do you understand that there are no dogs in God's human family? Do you understand? Do you understand that the faith of Jesus is always about welcoming and redeeming...and never about rejecting and revenge? Do you understand? Do you understand that our work is the work that comes from the heart and it's all about seeking and saving those who are lost?

Holiness, you see, comes from the heart, but it doesn't stop there. Holiness comes from the heart and it moves to the mouth, and to the hands, and to the feet. Laura and Bob: they understand disease. But, more importantly, they understand that God loves the people of Guatemala and Ghana just as much as God loves them.

DO YOU UNDERSTAND? Amen.

Charles E. Mize
 Union Congregational United Church of Christ
 Green Bay, Wisconsin
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