

Today's Scripture lessons together talk about how today is a day of a "New Beginning". There is something new happening with this man called Jesus.

In the first portion of our lesson from Matthew 15:10-20, we find Jesus responding to criticism from the Pharisees. They have criticized Jesus because his disciples aren't following the rules concerning washing one's hands as an act of ritual purification, Matthew 15:1-2. Before we write off the Pharisees we need to look at what was motivating them. They were calling the Hebrew people to be true to their heritage as God's chosen people; individuals blessed by God with the gift of the law as a blueprint to maintaining an intimate relationship with their Creator.

Jesus criticizes them not so much for observance of the law and the traditions that interpret it as for neglecting more serious concerns that affect our relationship with one another. Instead of focusing on ritual cleansing of the exterior, we need to be concerned with what is in the heart and is expressed in words that injure. For it is words and actions that are motivated by hate rather than love which lead to all sorts of evil. In recent days, we have seen how words spoken in speeches, on the internet, and during demonstrations have inspired individuals to pursue violent actions that have resulted in death and injury. Today as in Jesus' day we need to watch that our words don't condemn us and harm others.

In the second portion of our lesson from Matthew 15:21-28, we hear the story of Jesus and his interaction with a Canaanite woman. The Canaanites were considered as enemies of Judaism to be avoided at all costs. That Jesus would engage in conversation with her, let alone heal her defies what every observant Jew would do. Then there is the fact that she is a woman in a male dominated society who was expected to be subservient to her husband and quiet in public. Yet Jesus heals her completely ignoring what were considered God given instructions reinforced by centuries of teaching and tradition. In this act Jesus is demonstrating that God reaches out to all of his children Jew and Gentile. In the words of Paul in Christ there is neither Jew or Gentile, Male or Female, Galatians 3:28. Jesus doesn't recognize the divisions that we create to categorize human beings. We are called to a new beginning where those were labeled as inferior are recognized as equals; where those who were hated enemies, we reach out to with words and gestures of reconciliation.

The ways of Jesus are not easy but in them I find what I believe to be an expression of the true nature of God, an overwhelming amazing love, a grace that offers forgiveness and a way of life that can overcome the forces of greed, envy, hatred, and violence. We have in recent days seen the result of those who choose the way of hatred for others. It is a world in which there is injury and death.

This New Beginning of Jesus created for some the question of whether God had deserted the Hebrew people. Paul in today's lesson from Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32 proclaims that God's promises to the Hebrew people remain true. God continues to reach out to them as he has in the past. In Jesus, God offers them a way of life that fulfills all that God was saying to them through the law and prophets. Jesus came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. Jesus came that the words of the prophet Jeremiah of a time when the God's ways would be written on the very heart of individuals, Jeremiah 31:31-34.