

"What Is Within Really Counts"

Texts: Song of Solomon 2:8-13

James 1:17-27 (Series B, 13th Sunday after Pentecost) Ps. 45:1-2, 6-9

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Let us pray -

Someone sent me a little joke sometime ago, which I would like to share with you today. It goes like this: A father is in church with three of his young children, including his six year old daughter. As was the family custom, they sat in the very front row so that the children could properly witness the service.

During this particular service, the pastor was baptizing a tiny infant. The little six year old girl was quite taken by this, observing every detail of what was been said and pouring water over the little one's head. With a puzzled look on her face, the little girl turned to her father and asked, "Daddy, why is the pastor brainwashing that little baby?"

When I received that story, I happened to be thinking of today's scripture readings - that part where Jesus says to his disciples: *"Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.'"* and it struck me that there was something quite profound about the little girl's question; that indeed what is required by each of us is that we allow our *brains* to be washed - *our brains* and *our hearts* as well.

Today's readings speak about laws and regulations and about purity of heart, mind, and soul. About what makes for cleanliness in the eyes of God and what does not. Some Pharisees and teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gather around Jesus.

They are interested to know what it is that he is teaching. They noticed that some of his disciples were eating their food with hands that were ritually unclean, that is they had not washed them in the way the Pharisees said people should, and they complained to Jesus about this saying:

"Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with *'unclean' hands*?" The scripture goes on to say that the Pharisees had many rules about such things, about what was the proper way to prepare food, to wash cups and pots and bowls and indeed one's very self if one was to be regarded as "clean" in the eyes of God.

Jesus responds to them – by calling them hypocrites (two face) and telling them that they worship God in vain because they follow the traditions of men instead of the law of God.

It seems rather harsh response because the importance of these rules and traditions of the elders that are mentioned in today's gospel reading is that each rule, each tradition, was devised to help people be in closer relationship to God.

Ritual cleanliness and traditions about what one could or could not do on the Sabbath, or who one could or could not talk to or associate with, or what one could or could not eat or touch were devised for the good of the people, for the good of their relationship with God as individuals and as a called and chosen community of faith.

Each rule - each tradition was based upon Biblical passages, just as today, in some churches, regulations about divorce, advice about how you should raise your children, and information about how women should be subject to their husbands, are based on Biblical passages.

The traditions of Christianity do not require us, as the traditions of the Pharisees required the Jews, to worry about how we wash before eat, - nor do they prohibit us from walking over a mile on the Sabbath, but they can be just as restrictive, and ultimately just as meaningless as those kinds of rules were in Jesus' time.

Some of today's traditions claim that a person is not a true Christian if they do not believe in the literal wording of the Bible, or if they have not had a particular kind of "born again" experience.

Some state that a person is unclean if they associate with unbelievers, or if they take a drink, or if they do not believe that God did not create the world and all that is in it in six days and nights some six thousand and four years ago.

The effect of the traditions of the elders in the day of Jesus, and the traditions that are found today in so many churches today, is to misdirect people - to misdirect them by turning righteousness - by *turning cleanliness* - by *turning holiness* - into matters of how well we follow the external rules of our faith rather than to the law that God writes upon hearts that are open to him. How is our heart? Are we trying to conform the laws and the traditions of our faith - but inwardly are empty?

Suze Orman, financial planner and author of "The Courage to be Rich", tells of her successful career that went through a period when it was unsuccessful. During that time, she struggled to save face, to maintain an image of success.

She continued to entertain her friends at fine restaurants and to drive her luxury car to keep up the image of a successful professional. The truth was that every dinner, every car payment, every tank of gas was taking her deeper into debt.

Many folks, who believe in God are like Suze. They look good. They keep up the appearances. But inwardly they are impoverished - and the more they try to conform on the outside to what is supposed to come from inside the worse off they get - and in the end those around them are worse off as well.

What defiles a person are the unclean things that originate from within a person, not those that come to us from without. What is within is what really counts. What defiles a person is not what it is we eat, nor who it is that we eat with, rather it is our *anger*, our *pride*, our *refusal* to listen to others, *our sense of superiority*, *our sense of entitlement*, our sense of our *own righteousness*.

And what makes a person pure and holy is not who or what we avoid in the outer world - our hearts and our minds and our souls should be washed in the love of God.

And having been washed, to bring forth from inside us those things that Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.*

I want you all to take special note of that today. The things that are good those good things that come from within us are the fruit of the spirit that is within us. Our acts of goodness and love arise out of what we allow God to do within us.

Our *gentleness*, our *faithfulness*, our *kindness* grow not according to our attempts to keep some eternal law about how we should be faithful, kind or gentle, but rather they grow out of the word that is implanted within our hearts and minds by God.

And joy and peace and self control, things that are the marks of holiness and purity, come about not through constant striving to follow some regulations that are meant to help us be that way, but through meditating upon what it is that God has done for us - and is doing for us – and allowing God to direct our steps with all this in mind.

"Every good and perfect gift is from above," writes James, "coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. God chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created".

Holiness, purity, cleanliness is a gift from above. One that we should aspire to. But in aspiring to it we need to remember that it has nothing to do with that which is without us and everything to do with that which is within us, God himself.

And that which is within us can only be changed by the power of God's word at work within our lives - it can only be changed as we take that word inside us and allowing it to rule us.

"Do not merely listen to the word", James writes, "and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a person who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.

But the person who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it - he will be blessed in what he does"

What we need to learn is that the word that is heard in this church, the word that God has given us in the scriptures, the word that God puts into our hearts so that may meditate on it day and night, must be lived out. This can occur only if we welcome the word, if we let it take root and then allow it to prompt us to action.

We are to consciously seek to deepen our relationship with God. James reminds us that our God-given purpose is to act on behalf of those in distress, and to keep ourselves *unstained by the world*.

Committing ourselves again to God's commandments, let us *welcome with meekness the implanted word* that will save our souls as it goes straight to our hearts, wherein lies the voice of our Beloved. In accepting and returning the lyrics of love from, to, in, and through God, we gladly become the doers of God's Word, grace filled and soul-full.

The Heart is the matter that, when undeceived by human forgetfulness, greed, and selfishness, brings blessings, wisdom, and salvation to ourselves and to all we meet. We are to consciously seek to deepen our relationship with God. James reminds us that our God-given purpose is to act on behalf of those in distress, and to keep ourselves *unstained by the world*.

Blessed be the name of the one who washes our hearts and our minds and makes us acceptable in God's sight, both now and forevermore.

Amen.

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