

11th Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
16 August 2020

Matthew 15:10-28

I want to start this sermon by thanking all of you for allowing my family and I to take a small vacation last week in South Padre Island. We tried very hard to miss you, but every time we felt sentimental we went straight to the refrigerator for another beer. I don't know if this has ever happened to you, but I find it very difficult to be sentimental after I have had two or three Guinness. All joking aside, we had great time in the area, even though half of the island was closed off because of COVID-19, and everyone had to wear masks to enter and exit all the beaches. I read two new books, slept in every day, and now I feel refreshed and ready to continue my ministry among you. Now, let us talk about the Gospel assigned for today in our Lectionary.

We are in the 15th chapter of Matthew today. The passage begins at verse 10, as the lectionary does not give us the first nine verses. To understand the passage, however, we need to know about those verses. The chapter begins when some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus and asked, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat." This question tells us that this passage is concerned about ritual purity. The question is truly about what makes people clean or unclean in the eyes of the law.

Jesus responds by calling these visitors from Jerusalem, "hypocrites." They are concerned with rituals, like the purity rituals, but they forget about more important parts of the law. He gives them an example. The law demanded that people honor their father and their mother, but many of them had found loopholes that permitted them to neglect their duty to their parents. Jesus tells them they are the people against whom Isaiah said, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules." (Mt.15:8-9, Is. 29:13).

It is after this interaction with the Jerusalem visitors that Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into your mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." Later he adds, "What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and that is what defiles." The type of defilement Jesus is talking about is spiritual defilement.

According to the religious authorities of the day, any failure to obey every single regulation of the law (about 617 regulations) defiled a person spirituality, making him or her unclean and impure. Jesus rejects this superficial understanding of the law that is mostly based on ritualistic behaviors, but does not address issues of the heart. For Jesus,

it is not what enters the mouth that defiles a person but, rather, what comes out. He gives a few examples: “Evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, false witness, slander.”

All of these things defile the person and cause harm to others. He invites his hearers to pay more attention to the internal inclinations of their hearts than to the multiple rituals we humans devise to try to get God’s favor and to score points in some heavenly score card. True religion is not a checklist of things that must be done before we die, but a relationship with the God who loves us and cares for us. And, as we all know, relationships are a matter of the heart.

After Jesus finishes teaching about these matters of the heart, he travels to the region of Tyre and Sidon and encounters the woman whose daughter was ill. It is tempting to preach about that fascinating interaction between Jesus and this woman, but I want to stay briefly on these matters of the heart that cause defilement. It appears to me that many in our world are suffering from a dangerous heart condition. Over the last few years we have seen the return of many old hate groups around the world. The Neo-Nazis are gaining in numbers and power in several countries of Europe, especially in Germany. Here in the United States, we have seen an increase in activity among hate groups since George Floyd’s death several months ago: White supremacist groups, and new chapters of the KKK can now be found in 28 different states according to news outlets.

To these old enemies we must add the horrors produced by racism and discrimination, the huge threat caused by COVID-19 to our people and our economy, and the polarization in our political life. We are confronted daily with the great pain afflicting the homeless, the addicted, and the working poor in our nation. Suicide is on the rise and many of us can think of at least one person we knew personally who has taken his or her own life. When we look at the totality of what’s going on around the world and in our own country, it is very apparent that we have a heart problem.

One of the most distressing realities for me as a pastor is to listen to the “Pseudo-Religious” rhetoric of many who justify their hatred by quoting Scripture. Many of them believe they are doing God’s work. They take one or two verses of Scripture, often poorly understood, and use them as the basis for their hateful behaviors. They externalize their fears and sense of alienation and then claim they are doing God’s work because they can quote a poorly interpreted verse of some sacred text.

Let me just give you an example of this. My daughter and I were in London just two weeks after the June 3rd London Bridge attack in 2017. As you remember, several terrorists drove a van into pedestrians on the bridge, after which they crushed the van, run into a pub on Borough Market, and stabbed a number of people indiscriminately before the three attackers were shot dead by police. By the end of the episode eight people had been killed and 48 people had been injured. Witnesses claimed that the three attackers kept chanting, “This is for Allah” as they stabbed their victims. My daughter and I visited

the memorial of flowers and hundreds of posted notes at the base of the bridge. People from around the world wrote messages of support and defiance. Some messages had the generic, "Terror will never win!", "Together with London", and "We are London" messages. Others were detailed letters filled with pain and anger. There was a note of an 8-year old child which read, "My heart is broken. I just don't understand why they did what they did. I am very sad and I am scared. I don't know why God lets things like this happen." The terrorists claimed they were doing God's work, while some of those affected blamed God for allowing this hate-filled attack to happen.

Of course, we don't have to go all the way back to 2017. Just think of all the mass shooting events we have had over the last three years. Many so-called religious people have forgotten that faith is a matter of the heart and not a list of chores. I wonder how many members of hate groups go to church every week, do their prayers, and read their Bibles. Yet, their hearts are filled with darkness and hatred. They have made religion a matter of duty and they believe their God has appointed them as judges over people they see as infidels, inferior, or somehow undeserving of God's love and mercy.

We have a heart problem and Christ is the only heart surgeon who can cure our condition. Only the one who loved to the end can teach us to love others. Only the one who died for his enemies can teach us to love those with whom we disagree. Only the one who took our sin to the cross can free us from our hatred, our arrogant discrimination, our intolerance, and our blaming others for our fears and sense of isolation.

We need Christ in our hearts and we need to preach Christ as the solution to the problem that afflicts the world. We as believers have a responsibility to spread love and to pray for peace. We must do our part to show the world that Christianity means love of others, commitment to the truth that only Christ can judge the world, and generous commitment to serve those in need, regardless of race or socio-economic status. We must show the world a different version of Christianity, one that cares more about matters of the heart than about checklists and rituals. May God continue to bless us. Amen!