

CLEANSSED HEARTS

Proper 17 Year B: James 1:17-27
Psalm 45:1-2, 7-10
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

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Key Passages: *“This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”* (Mark 7:6b)

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. (James 1:26)

While I was in seminary I made two foreign trips, as guests of churches in the Anglican Communion. As part of my preparation, I attended the travel clinics offered to members of the Yale community who were preparing for international travel. One common message was to exercise care in consuming food and drinks, especially from street vendors and farmers’ markets. In places where refrigeration was often lacking, where dangerous pesticides were often used, and where clean water could not be assumed, it was necessary to exercise caution in ways not familiar to most Americans.

In both of my trips, I tried to remember what I had been told. But it soon became clear to me that my hosts were well-versed in these precautions. Their quiet care for me and my travelling companions was evident every day. Sometimes they would deny themselves a share in the food they prepared for us, offering us safety while they assumed risks that were part of their daily lives. These were not empty rituals of washing but signs of care and respect, that brought me closer to my hosts as I glimpsed their lives.

In today’s gospel, Jesus’ disciples are criticized for apparently failing to follow the “traditions of the elders” by eating with unwashed hands. It is one of many occasions in which Jesus confronts religious authorities. In this case they question the disciples’ behavior, not actions of Jesus himself. They hold him responsible as the rabbi, the teacher, for proper instruction of his disciples.

Jesus responds with a quotation from the prophet Isaiah, the prophetic tradition that underlies all of Hebrew scriptures: that our following of religious commands are ways of showing respect to God by disciplining our practices to focus on aligning ourselves with God. The prophet recognizes that too often we become so focused on the minutiae of rules that we lose the intent. Just as ritual washing has its origins in the practical need to avoid harmful substances, so we see that religious rules point us beyond rigid adherence toward a deeper understanding of God’s desire for our wellbeing.

Isaiah's focus, as it was with Jesus, is on the heart, the seat of our wills, the source of our thoughts and actions. The prophetic admonition is to orient our hearts to God. When we lose that orientation, we are subject to the criticism that Jesus quotes from Isaiah, "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me," (Mark 7:6b).

And how is it that we get off course, how is it that we lose the orientation of hearts? Isaiah says, "In vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines." Jesus adds this accusation, "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition," (Mark 7:8). Jesus is not rejecting the Torah, the Mosaic code that is God's gift to the people of Israel. He is joining the long prophetic tradition that constantly calls us to see the laws as fundamental ways of learning who God is and how we are to live as God's people. To see the law as shaper of our hearts in ways that help us live faithfully, as we follow the fundamental commandment to love God and neighbor.

The task for us, as faithful people, is the same as it has always been for humankind: to see through the mediation of human experience to the mysterious and unchanging love of God. For it is in these glimpses that we begin to sort out our all-too-human tendencies and discover the divine image that God has placed in each of us. When we see our proclivities for power, possessions, and privilege in the bright light of God's grace, we are called to examine our hearts and to pray for the cleansing power of God's forgiveness. We ask for the wisdom to understand God's will, made visible in the life of Jesus, so that we too can find ourselves in loving sacrifice and service to the world that God loves.

In the last few days, we have been remembering two Americans who found comfort and strength in their faith: Senator John McCain and singer Aretha Franklin. In differing ways, each of them demonstrated lives of service rooted in a sense of God's providence. John McCain, by his own admission, turned from a playboy life to a deep understanding of morality as he recalled words of Scripture during his long captivity in Viet Nam. Aretha Franklin established herself as one of the greatest of America's singers by constantly returning to the gospel songs that nourished her soul.

And so it was fitting that both these distinguished persons were remembered and celebrated as children of God. In houses of Christian worship, with their familiar Scriptures, prayers, and music, the mourners and all of us could look to the God who is, as we heard in first reading, "the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation of shadow due to change," (James 1:17b) In that brilliant and constant light, we see ourselves as we truly are, beloved of God not because we are perfect, but because God's love is perfect.

In a gospel rendition of “Precious Lord, take my hand” and in a stirring “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” in words of Scripture and prayer, and in heart-felt tributes and calls to emulate lives of service to justice and peace, the funerals helped us to sort out what are truly God’s commands to us from the exigencies of human expedience and compromise. We pray to understand, as philosopher Soren Kierkegaard said, that “purity of heart is to will one thing.” We see God’s light in lives well-lived, not perfect people, but two who tried to follow the call of faithful living in response to God’s gifts of love and courage.

For those of us who worship regularly, we have an opportunity to stay connected to God, to see ourselves in God’s light, a light that both convicts and restores us. In times of grief and confusion, and in times of gratitude and joy, we come into God’s house to understand ourselves as we glimpse God’s desires for us. We know week-to-week what the larger world may only glimpse in times of national grief, that coming together in God’s house is a natural way to look for God’s presence and to find our place in God’s plan for our healing and wellbeing. We claim God’s promise from the prophet Ezekiel, “I will sprinkle clean water upon you... A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you,” (Ezekiel 36:25a, 26a).

A recent poll by the Pew Research Center asked adults in the US to give their reasons for regular attendance at religious service, (“regular” being defined as “at least once or twice a month.”) The most popular answer, given by 81% of the respondents, was “to become closer to God.” Other responses chosen by a majority of participants included “to make me a better person” (68%), “for comfort in times of trouble or sorrow” (66%), “to be part of a community of faith” (57%), and—my personal favorite--“I find the sermons valuable” (59%). (Results quoted in *Christian Century*, August 29, 2018.)

Actually, I think all those responses are part of the same enterprise. In the Abrahamic faith shared by Jews, Muslims, and Christians, we believe in a God who acts in history, through human relationships and events. God calls a people and offers them a covenant for living that shapes their relationships with the Creator, the natural order, and fellow humans. God’s words are transmitted through human beings who discern God’s will and learn to live together in a covenant relationship. God’s power is glimpsed in the arc of history in which we see that God is always offering peace, comfort, and justice.

And as Christians, we believe that the God of history has acted most decisively through the Incarnation, through the divine choice to live in our world in the person of Jesus, whom we recognize as God’s anointed Son. We understand God most clearly when we follow Jesus as God’s revelation to us. God’s will is mediated to us in the hearts and lives and actions of humans, in each of us as individuals and in the communities that God forms. We “become closer to God” as we glimpse God in our own hearts and in the hearts of all those, living and dead, with whom we share this journey. We need each other to help us

recognize the Holy Spirit, to see how Jesus' love is active in the world, and to give and receive God's forgiveness. In this orientation of our hearts, we adopt practices that discipline us to live beyond the selfishness, privilege, and greed that are all too tempting as ways of life. We become, as James says, "doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves," (James 1:22).

Next Sunday we will begin our program year with a full schedule of worship, service, and learning. There will be many opportunities for you to engage in activities and practices that will help to orient your heart towards a deeper understanding of God. Our challenge is always to sort out God's commands from "human traditions", or to quote the latter of James, to "rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls," (James 1:21). I encourage you to make a sustained commitment to those practices, to find ways of participating that will deepen your knowledge of Jesus, yourself, and fellow parishioners and will help us better understand how to live as a beloved community.

In her gritty book *Traveling Mercies*, writer Anne Lamott tells of a young child who became lost in an unfamiliar part of the city in which she lived. Increasingly frightened, she ran up and down the streets, but she couldn't find a recognizable landmark. Eventually a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car, and they drove around until she finally saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, "You can let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here." (*Traveling Mercies*, p. 55)

My friends, the prayers, the words, the music, the sacraments, and the love here can be guideposts for you too. Let's find our way home together.