

WHAT DEFILES US

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME
SUNDAY, AUGUST 17, 2014
First Presbyterian Church
Marianna, Florida
Ted W. Land, Interim Pastor

MATTHEW 15:1-20

*“What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.”
Matthew 15:18b*

There were times when Jesus took on the religious authority and traditions of His time face to face and head on. Perhaps no where in the Bible is that more true than in this morning’s text.

The traditions of the Jews were as important to them as the words of the law and the prophets. Breaking with tradition was breaking the law, as far as they were concerned, and left the law breaker defiled, unclean, in danger of being excluded from the religious life of the community.

The ritual washing of hands before the meal was not done for sanitation, for cleanliness, though it could have been and should have been. It was a ritual, done for the sake of ritual. And it wasn’t the risk of contamination, of food poisoning, of spreading germs, that offended the Pharisees and scribes; it was the breach of tradition.

Jesus cited an example of the Pharisaical laws of the day contradicting the scriptures, and quoted Isaiah back at them, as Isaiah charged the Hebrews with “teaching human precepts as doctrines.”

This is a risk in the church. It was a risk to the Jews in Old Testament times, and by the time Jesus came; they were worshipping the traditions instead of the Lord God of Israel. Their customs and traditions meant more to them than the law and the prophets, and if the words of the prophets are to be taken seriously, the abandonment of scripture in favor of tradition had been going on for hundreds of years.

Jesus came to restore the right relationship with God, and in truth much of what Jesus said and did flew in the face of tradition. But Jesus didn’t worry about being faithful to tradition. He was being faithful to His father, and to the word of God. Indeed, He was the Word of God made flesh, and He came not to defy the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them. He didn’t come to fulfill tradition.

It took about a thousand years after Jesus came for the Christian Church to become as bad as the Jews had become at the time Jesus arrived. But from the Middle Ages on, things grew worse. Corruption and politics were as bad in the

Roman Catholic Church as they were in the land of Israel in the days of the Herods.

The Protestant Reformation came in response to the corruption, the wandering away from scripture, the elevation of tradition over all else. Martin Luther, John Calvin, Menno Simon, John Knox, Farrell, Beza, Zwingli, countless others spoke out and wrote against the abuses of power, the unfaithfulness of the clergy, the emphasis of tradition over scripture that was a part of the Roman Catholic Church (that was indeed the only church) in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Now we must remember that the Roman Catholic Church went through a time of Counter-Reformation, after the Protestant Reformation, and much of what was wrong was corrected.

But we human beings are peculiar and stubborn creatures. We keep falling back into the same patterns and the same behaviors. We never seem to learn. We make the same mistakes over and over again, and we fall back into the same old ways. We may abandon the old traditions that have taken on a mystique and a power of their own, but then we create a new set, and empower them so that we worship a new set of traditions instead of the old, still worshipping and serving the tradition we've created instead of the Creator.

But some things remain universally true. Some sins stay with us. One of those is the very basic truth that Jesus imparts in this passage. He was speaking about the dietary laws of the Jews, still observed by those Jews who "keep kosher" and often imposed on Christians by some rigid sects and branches of the church in modern times, like the "Branch Davidians" (who may or may not have been Christian, but claimed to be, and upheld the Old Testament dietary laws.)

What Jesus said was plainly put: it isn't what goes into our mouths, what we eat, that defiles us. It is what comes out of our mouths.

The world has a dirty mouth. It curses. It lies. It verbally abuses. It taunts. It ridicules. It mocks. It tells dirty jokes. It makes unkind comments. It criticizes. It condemns. It judges. That is the world in which we live. That is the people with whom we live. That is who we are.

The besetting sin of the twenty-first century is that we have a dirty mouth.

This is what defiles the world in which we live, not the things we put in our mouths. Now make no mistake about it, we put things in our mouths that harm us. Alcohol, tobacco, illegal drugs, too much food, too much caffeine, don't defile or corrupt us, they just hurt and kill us. They harm the body, but not the soul. If the soul, the spirit was right, maybe we wouldn't need those things.

Come to think about it, if the soul, the spirit was right, we wouldn't need to have a dirty mouth, would we?

We wouldn't need to say the things we say if we had that right relationship with Jesus, would we?

The Bible is full of instructions and directions to help us with our dirty mouth problem.

It begins in the Old Testament. In the Ten Commandments, we remember "thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain." One can't turn on the television set or the radio without hearing that commandment broken. The word "God" and the name "Jesus" and even "Jesus Christ" are part and parcel of our vocabulary of swear words. We often use "Oh My God" as an expression of delight as well as of dismay, and when we do so, we are breaking not a tradition but a commandment of God.

The commandment about "bearing false witness" has to do with "dirty mouth" as well. When we lie about something or someone, that is something coming out of the mouth that defiles us. Some folks tell lies because they embellish the ordinary things of their lives. Others tell lies to gain advantage in business. Some folks tell lies out of malice, with evil intentions. But there really isn't such a thing as "a little white lie" or "an innocent lie."

The Apostle Paul tells us that we are to tell the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, and time and time again in the New Testament we are told to tell the truth, to walk in the truth. We are told that if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us (I John 1:8). And yet, we continue to lie, and defile ourselves in that way.

But bearing false witness is more than just simply not telling the truth. Included in that Commandment is the sin of gossip. When we tell an untruth we defile ourselves, and when we tell an untruth about another, we besmirch them as we defile ourselves with the dirty mouth that repeats falsehoods, that twists truth, that casts aspersions and impugns character.

In this election year, the mud-slinging that takes place is an excellent example of dirty mouth at its worst.

This is nothing new. When the prophet Isaiah was called by God, he cried out, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips!" (Isaiah 6:5)

God sent an angel with a live coal from the altar in the temple in Jerusalem, and the angel touched Isaiah's lips with the coal, saying, "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." (Isaiah 6:7)

Well, it would take a lot of coals to cleanse the lips of all the dirty mouths in the world today.

But we don't need live coals to touch our mouths, to take our guilt away, to blot out our sins.

Jesus does that for us, if we will but let Him, if we will but trust Him, if we will but follow Him.

With Isaiah, we can say, "Woe is me, I am a person with a dirty mouth, and I live among a people with dirty mouths. " And Jesus says, "I love you, I forgive you, follow me."

Let us pray.

Create in us clean hearts, O God, and renew right spirits within us. And may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, o God, our strength, and our redeemer. Amen.