

El Estero Sermon 2021-08-29 – “What Goes In and What Comes Out”

I am very grateful for the invitation to be with you today while Pastor Ted is on study leave and attending to family business. It has been my privilege to be connected with your congregation for a number of years now. I love seeing so many familiar faces in today's virtual gathering.

When I served as Presbytery Moderator last year, I had the opportunity to select readings for the worship service at each of the Presbytery meetings. The focus for me was on how Jesus treated people He encountered. Our Lord didn't generalize about people. Oh, in those days lots of people surely did generalize. People in those days looked at Samaritans, for example, and treated them all as “ritually unclean”. But that's not how Jesus acted with the Samaritan woman at the well in the Gospel of John. That story was the reading I selected at the first Presbytery meeting last year. No. Instead, Jesus treated his encounter with her as a chance to make a connection. Not just with her, but with all the people of her village. He made the connection with her. He stayed with the people of the village for two days. And as John says, “And many more believed.”

Same thing with Canaanites. In those days, Canaanites were known as dogs. But when Jesus encountered a Canaanite woman in the Gospel of Mark (actually, Mark refers to her as a Syrophenician woman, but Matthew refers to her as a Canaanite woman), Jesus didn't look at her that way. No. Again, He dealt with her, just as who she was. He made a connection with her, too. She interacted with Jesus, and showed Jesus her faith. And Jesus cast out a demon from the woman's daughter.

Jesus wasn't someone who blindly followed convention, as we see over and over again in the gospels. Jesus didn't ignore conventional wisdom, but He wasn't a slave to it. When it came to people, Jesus didn't interact with individuals based on their culture's reputation. Jesus had something else in mind. He was looking for people of faith, and for people looking to have faith. He didn't care if they were Jews, or Samaritans, or Canaanites, or even Romans (recall Jesus healing the centurion's daughter because the man showed his faith).

In today's Gospel reading from Mark – which, by the way, comes right before the story of Jesus's interaction with the Syrophenician woman), we see Jesus criticize excessively strict adherence to ritual and cultural norms. In this case, Jesus was getting grief from the Pharisees and scribes – wasn't Jesus always getting grief from the Pharisees? The Pharisees were among those tasked with making sure that the Jews knew and adhered to the ritual and cultural norms. In this case, the Pharisees were criticizing Jesus because

His disciples did not wash their hands before eating. As the gospel says, they “were eating with defiled hands”.

In response, Jesus calls the Pharisees and scribes hypocrites. Jesus quotes from Isaiah – in this case Isaiah 29, beginning at verse 13: “And the Lord said: “Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men, therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.”

Jesus accuses the Pharisees and the scribes of abandoning the commandment of God and holding to human tradition. Jesus isn’t saying that the human tradition is wrong, nor is He saying that following human tradition is wrong. What Jesus is saying is that excessive focus on human tradition, to the exclusion of God’s commandments, is wrong. Those who do this will perish.

Jesus is cautioning the Pharisees and the scribes not to let their adherence to ritual and tradition overrule the requirement that they follow God’s commandments.

Jesus then takes the opportunity to teach the people by making an extreme contrast. Jesus tells the people, at verse 15, “there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

Why were there all these laws about hand washing, pot washing, utensil washing, and even dining couch washing? Well, back in those days, germs and disease were a big deal. People had all kinds of jobs that required them to come into contact with things that were dangerous if they got into your food. Shepherds and goatherds came into contact with their livestock and with the livestock’s waste. Insects would land on that waste and then land on food, on utensils. People’s immune systems weren’t what they are today.

So there was a crying need to wash up before eating. The consequences could be deadly. So in a very human sense, all the rules back then about food and cleanliness were really important, to avoid illness, often serious illness, maybe even worse.

Even in the face of these dangers, Jesus says, “There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile.” Now, even today, we can think of things that we don’t eat because they’re dangerous. But Jesus isn’t talking about getting sick. Jesus is talking about harm to the inside of a person. Harm to a person’s heart, to a person’s soul. What a person physically takes in can’t do that. What a person expresses or does, however, can do

that. Jesus says, "For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come". Jesus goes on and lists a whole bunch of these, including evil thoughts, deceit, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. And then Jesus says, "All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

Does this gospel lesson have any relevance to today? I think it does. Just think of the pandemic. Millions of people have gotten Covid. Millions have gotten very, very sick. Millions of people have died. Clearly there are incredibly serious physical consequences to the pandemic. Our instructions about handwashing, mask wearing, and social distancing come out of our concerns about the physical consequences of the virus entering our bodies. We have new vaccines which we bring into our bodies to keep the virus away.

I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm tired. Really tired. I call it Covid fatigue. I can only imagine what pastors are going through, ministering to their flocks from a distance. For me, the lack of normalcy, the stress of wondering how people I might encounter will react in these pandemic times, all of it is just wearing me down. It's stressing me out.

There are benefits, of course, to trying to stem the course of the pandemic, but there also are costs. Stress and fatigue are two of the costs. Inability to get regular medical care, to get illnesses diagnosed, are yet other costs. Not having a job, not being able to put food on the table or keep a roof over your head because businesses are closed or extremely limited – those are still other costs. It's hard to process all of this and see a path forward to the other side of what we're going through now.

We have been told to do, and we have done all kinds of things in the course of the pandemic, to try and get past it. Our abilities to be with each other, masked or maskless, inside or out, have changed a lot in the last 18 months. Many of us have been OK with all the changes in direction to varying degrees, I'm sure. We're all different, so it wouldn't be surprising for us to have had all kinds of different reactions.

We thought we were over the worst of this earlier this year, as medical practitioners learned better how to treat Covid patients, and people got vaccinated. We started to get back to what seemed like more regular, normal lives. Then, the Delta variant hit. And the rules have changed, again. And here we are again, restricted, fearful, in some cases alone, again.

And why are we doing all this? Why are the authorities stressing that we do all this? It's to avoid having Covid enter our bodies and make us sick, maybe very sick, maybe mortally ill. Maybe worse.

So we're wearing masks, we're drying our hands out with hand sanitizer, most of us are getting vaccinated, because we're concerned of the possibly deadly consequences. We don't want Covid to come into our bodies.

Does this matter? Are these things important? Sure they are. For the record, I got vaccinated back in March. I have been following the mask wearing rules, no matter how many times they change. I know I'm not alone. I know there are others who are more content – in some cases, a lot more content than I am with the rules. I know there are others who are scared of the consequences of not following the rules.

Masks are supposed to keep us from giving Covid to people who can inhale – who can take into their bodies – what we exhale – what comes out of our bodies. Vaccines, which are injected into our bodies, are supposed to make us more resistant to Covid. All of these rules that people are arguing about, or even fighting about, are about things that can go into our bodies. These rules are all human-made rules, of course, just like the hand-washing rules that we heard about in the gospel ready today.

There are lots of people out there who are really upset, even angry about people who don't seem to be following the rules. The rule-followers are furious with the rulebreakers. **“WEAR YOUR MASK!” “GET VACCINATED!”**

The approaches to these “rulebreakers” are vocal, and sometimes they are physical. On the other hand, people who don't want to wear masks, or who don't want to be vaccinated (or both), are vocally and sometimes physically resistant. There are arguments and even physical altercations, in the street, in stores and restaurants, at meetings.

All of this is about the importance of following human-made rules. People who want the rules followed seem often to focus on the rules to the exclusion of anything else.

But in our gospel reading, Jesus tells us that following human-made rules is not the whole story. We aren't supposed to follow human-made rules and ignore God's commandments. Ignoring God's commandments is what can defile us.

What did Jesus say to the Pharisees, and then to the people? Jesus told them not to worry about what goes into our bodies, but what comes out. All those sinful acts that come when we say and do horrible things.

Now, please understand. I am most certainly not telling anyone or urging anyone or even suggesting to anyone that they ignore any of the rules that the state, local, and national authorities are laying down for us. As I say, I've been following those rules. And Jesus most certainly was not telling the Pharisees and scribes, or his audience, to ignore the rules about handwashing. No. Jesus was reminding everyone that these are human-made rules, and that they should not override God's commandments.

Bringing this gospel message back to today, what I am saying is that, in the midst of Covid fatigue, and in the midst of obsession with these human-made rules, we need to remember how to treat each other. We don't see each other in person that much, so it's going to take some getting back into practice.

Over the years, I have observed that it's easy to sit behind a keyboard and type all manner of hateful and horrible things, attacks on our fellow human beings. Things that if we were to say them in person, we might get a violent response. Knowing that might keep us from saying those things in person, but knowing that we are distant and that there won't be a physical consequence to saying those harmful things, can prompt us to just say whatever comes to mind. And what we say could be hateful and hurtful. The very kind of thing that Jesus was warning about when He responded to the criticism of the disciples eating with "defiled hands". Again, Jesus said, "For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come ... All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

If we follow Jesus's teachings in today's gospel reading, we can treat the human-made rules about Covid as important. We can try to get others to follow those rules. We can try hard to get others to follow those rules. But we should not make those rules more important than Jesus's commandments: To love the Lord our God with our whole heart, our whole soul, and our whole mind. And to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

There's another aspect of Jesus's teachings about following human-made rules. This aspect sends me back to the gospel readings I selected for the Presbytery meetings last year. Back in Jesus's time, people made up rules about different peoples. As I mentioned, Samaritans were ritually unclean. Canaanites were dogs. Romans? Well, we can only imagine what the Jews thought of the Romans who were holding down the Jews and treating them so badly.

Jesus didn't treat the Samaritan woman the way the Jews viewed the Samaritans. Jesus didn't treat the Canaanite woman the way the Jews viewed the Canaanites. Jesus didn't treat the centurion the way Jews viewed the Romans. And Jesus didn't treat His disciples

the way the Pharisees and the scribes viewed the disciples and others who ate with defiled hands.

Jesus recognized that everyone is different, that everyone has their own story, no matter their ancestry, their homeland, or any number of other commonly shared physical characteristics. Looking at us in our pandemic times, when we see that someone isn't wearing a mask, or we find out that someone isn't vaccinated, we can't really know all the reasons for the choices that that person has made. Maybe the person has a respiratory problem, and masks restrict their breathing too much. Maybe the person has a health issue that would make a vaccine dangerous to that person. We shouldn't allow our own fears and insistence on following the rules to justify verbal or even physical abuse of others.

By the same token, maybe some people aren't following the mask wearing rules or aren't getting vaccinated because they don't trust these human-made rules. That lack of trust does not justify verbal or physical abuse of others who do follow the rules, or who did get vaccinated.

All of these arguments about Covid are about what goes into our bodies. We should not let rules about what goes into our bodies, blind us to what comes out of our bodies, that can be hurtful to others. This is a lesson we can practice, even through our Covid fatigue, and it's a lesson we can share with others.

Amen.