

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights OH
Dirty Hands, Clean Hearts
Homily August 30, 2009
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Open our eyes, Lord, to see you all around us. Open our hearts, Lord, to welcome you in. Amen.

I will admit to you that I have spent quite a lot of evenings this summer watching crime and detective shows on late night TV. I like to read murder mysteries also, but there is something about being presented with a puzzle and getting it all solved in 55 minutes that has real appeal to me, especially when I am trying to forget about work and relax. It's all about motive with those crimes shows, isn't it? My husband, Greg, and I watched a series of one hour episodes of Criminal Minds the other night, and I was amazed at how the characters worked so hard to get inside the mind of the criminal, and what a scary place that was! That was what made the drama, well, that and whether they could unlock the puzzle of that tortured mind in time to catch the bad guy and stop another murder from happening.

To get inside another person's mind, to seek their motive, in order to guess what might happen next. Very intriguing... it got me thinking about how important a person's motive is to us. We see it in the law shows and throughout our culture – if the person meant harm, well that is much worse than some sort of tragic accident. It certainly plays a major role in our criminal courts today, and in permeates much of our judgment of other people. If they mean to do damage, we hardly offer any pity. If they have good intentions, we are willing to be much more lenient.

That idea of intention certainly plays a role in today's gospel reading. The Pharisees are accusatory of the disciples' unwillingness to follow the purity rituals. Jesus reminds them that what really matters is what lives in our hearts, what we are trying to accomplish, and whether our main goal is a closer relationship with God. In fact he quotes Isaiah saying, "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." What Jesus is railing against here is that human habit we all have of shifting our focus to empty, outward rituals and forgetting about the change of heart that those very rituals are supposed to signify or facilitate. He calls them hypocrites, he accuses them of being more concerned with tradition than with sincere worship of God. In fact, he goes on to say that they use the man-made traditions to conveniently avoid following God's most basic laws of loving God and loving neighbor.

Now before we go too far in vilifying the Pharisees, let's remember that they always get a bad rap in the Gospels. The Pharisees were not some evil cult set out to destroy God's people. They were actually seen as reformer's in their day. They believed that all Jews should take on the rituals previously reserved for only the temple priests. They believed that "God gave the people the heritage, the kingdom, the priesthood and the holiness." (2 Maccabees). They also believed that there were two Torahs – the first one was the five books of Moses, and this they called the

Written Torah. There was a second one, they claimed, which they called the Oral Torah, and that was the corpus of laws and traditions that comprised the ongoing process of interpreting the written Torah – the analysis and argument that helped to make sense of it in various situations. So they took their “traditions” very seriously – even elevating them to the level of sacred text.

I share this information with you partly because it provides some context for today’s reading, but also because I think it is so easy for us to decide that the Pharisee’s are the bad guys, and we aren’t anything like them, therefore, we really are OK. As long as we don’t judge people for not following arcane, complicated, meaningless rituals, then we must be doing fine, right? As it turns out, the more we know about the Pharisees, the more we can see ourselves in them. We are Pharisees in many regards. We too are faithful people, struggling to discern what is right and how best to follow God’s will. We make many of the same mistakes that they did.

When I was thinking about rituals, - how they look and feel when they are performed by people with unchanged hearts, and what they are like when they hold meaning for the people involved. It reminds me of our definition of sacrament:

An outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.

There’s a relationship here between what we see and touch on the outside, and what is really happening on the inside.

So baptism, eucharist, and our other sacramental rites - these are not supposed to be empty rituals, but rather a visible symbol of something deep and intangible going on inside us – a change of heart, a transformation, a new intention or motivation. Sacraments take ordinary objects – water, oil, bread, wine and make them sacred by setting them apart with intention – just as we are supposed to do with our whole lives – set them apart for living God’s way, an intentional life of love. Then our whole lives become sacraments – set aside to live God’s love in the world.

Except when we forget, and our sacraments and other rituals become empty and meaningless. Except when we get so hung up on who is doing right and who must be judged that we forget that God is the ultimate judge. Except when we forget that the object of our worship is supposed to be God, not the ritual itself and we begin to worship the ritual. Except when we seek loopholes so that we may further our own will instead of serving God’s will. Except when we delight in pointing out how those around us are wrong, don’t belong, should be excluded. So how do we remember what’s really important? What serves as a corrective for us when we are tempted to go astray?

Draw the circle wide, the song tells us. There’s room for everyone at the table. And the value of community is that we serve as a mirror to one another, forcing honesty and humility as well as unconditional support and synergistic strength. And in the safety of this community, we can have the courage to look within our own hearts and see if our intentions are aligned with God.

So come to the table today ready to align your will with God, to seek his face in everyone you meet, to set your heart upon the path of love and service. And God will meet you there – in the bread and wine, in the community, in the symbols made sacred with intention and love.

I'm not sure a TV show called "Inside the Spiritual Hearts of the Faithful" really has a chance in this day and age, even with 300+ cable channels. But living it sure is an adventure. Welcome aboard. Fasten your seat belts. You're in for the ride of your life. Amen.