

“Living With Sin”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
August 27, 2017**

Old Testament lesson: Psalm 19:7-14

New Testament lesson: Matthew 15:10-20

I attended a called presbytery meeting last week dealing with trouble between the pastor of a Presbyterian Church in the Kansas City area and some of the elders on Session.

One of the issues was frequency of Communion – the pastor wanted Communion once a month and the elders wanted something different. I don't know what; they didn't say, but I think it was less frequent.

This and other issues resulted in verbal attacks during meetings – with Presbytery representatives present – as well as allegations that an elder threatened to physically injure the pastor and told the pastor's wife that she needed to get a job to help offset the pastor's salary.

“It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person” – monthly or quarterly Communion – “but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles-threats.” Please join me in praying for our Christian brothers and sisters at that particular church, and for each of us as we, too, struggle with being true to the heart of our Christian faith.

That is what today's New Testament lesson is about – the heart of the Christian faith. Jesus was dealing with people on all sides who struggled with being true to the faith. On one side, he has the scribes and the Pharisees who, in this case, have just questioned him leading up to today's scripture reading, saying, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.” It could just as easily been too much Communion or not enough -the things churches fight about.

On the other side, Jesus has the gospel that he alone embodies, the gospel he is breathing into the hearts and minds of his followers with every word he says, every action he takes. So it's no wonder that this confrontation about hand washing and purity becomes a teach moment for Jesus when it comes to what's right and what is wrong, and where the Christian faith comes down on each issue.

He says to his disciples, “... Whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles” Wow! Did Jesus just use toilet talk to teach the gospel? He surely did! But I'm not going to use toilet talk up here; I like being your pastor way too much to do something like that. We don't need any church fights here.

Instead, I'm going to talk about the other side of Jesus' illustration – the heart. "What comes out ... of the heart..." says Jesus, "is what defiles." "For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person says Jesus, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

Jesus is saying that all the church guidelines and religious practices in the world are of no use whatsoever if they are not, first, based in the heart of Christian living, the heart of the gospel.

Let's look at each of the things Jesus says defile our lives and are repulsive to God. The first is evil intentions. That's pretty clear. We are not to let sinful or misguided thoughts lead the day. That's not only at church but even more so in our everyday lives when the pressure really mounts.

Instead, we should seek the best for ourselves and others, and do what it takes to provide that, even if it's not convenient or even when it costs us something – our precious time or money. The bottom line is, be true to yourself – who God created you to be – and be kind to your neighbor.

The second thing that Jesus says defiles a person is murder. How many people here have murdered someone? Just kidding, don't raise your hands. But seriously, how many people here have killed off another person's hopes and dreams, smothered someone's dignity or self-worth, verbally or emotionally cut someone off at the knees. We have the power to breathe life into another human being – spiritually, emotionally – or to kill them off. And you know it when you've done that. Think about it-a time when we killed off another spiritually or emotionally. Make a different choice next time.

Also on Jesus' lists is adultery. Adultery is the act of separating what God has joined together – two people in marriage. Don't do that. Instead, we should always be striving to support couples and their families. That's what it means to be a Christian, a fellow child of God, a brother or sister in Christ, a member of God's spiritual family. As our church mission statement says – In Service to All God's Children and Their Families. I've written a lot about that and we're going to make it more visible around here – through the website, bulletin and newsletter, as well as in our buildings. And we hope to make our support of families more visible in our lives – as a congregation – so that the people of Independence come to look upon First Presbyterian as the church that cares about them.

OK. The next one is fornication. Jesus says that having sex outside of marriage defiles a person. And yet it happens all the time. When sexual intimacy is not linked to marriage, it does take something from a person, doesn't it? People need to be responsible for their sexuality, to hold it as the pure and beautiful expression of love and oneness that God intended. Because when they don't, it is cheapened, and defiled and ruined.

Rounding out Jesus' list of things that defile a person are theft, false witness and slander. Don't take what's not yours, don't lie, and don't attack someone politically – seeking to drag them through the mud or set them up for a fall.

Do you see how following these simple instructions of Jesus would turn this world around in a heartbeat! It would – from our highest levels of government to our most intimate relationships and everything in between – our cities and towns, our families and our friends. No evil intentions, no murderous thoughts or actions, no breaking up marriages or sleeping around, no stealing, lying or back-stabbing.

This is how we stay true to who God created us to be. Regardless of what's happening all around us every day, we know how to live like a follower of Christ. The hard part is doing it, and dealing with those who aren't – those who live contrary to what Jesus taught and embodied. Luckily for us, Jesus has an answer for that, too. How to live in a world of misguided, sinful souls.

When the disciples ask Jesus, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offence when they heard what you said," Jesus answered them, saying, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit."

In other words, those who have set their hearts on evil intentions and things like murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, and slander will not last. It is faithful, spiritually-based living that wins the day.

Greg Laurie points to this in his article "The Upside Down Church." Describing the Christians of the first century who arose directly out of Jesus' teachings, Laurie says, "Christians didn't outargue pagans – they outlived them.... ...The Christians of the first century outthought, outprayed and outlived the unbelievers. Their weapons were positive, not negative. ... They prayed and preached and proclaimed the message of Christ, put to death on the cross, risen from the dead, and ready to change lives. And they backed up their message with actions: giving, loving."

We don't have to go picking fights with those we're certain are off the rails when it comes to God's will. If their thoughts and actions are not of God, they will fall, eventually. And in the meantime, we are stuck living with sin. Not living in sin, that's not right – but living with sin, all around us.

We live in a fallen world, we are part of that fallen world. We are surrounded by the sin and misguided thoughts and actions of others, and of ourselves. You know those things in your life that are just not good for you or for your family or friends.

This is the "come to Jesus" moment. If you and your behaviors are at the root of upset and discord, it's a good bet God is trying to uproot those behaviors from your life – flush them away – so that they no longer hold you back.

We can each think of one thing that gets in the way of who God calls us to be. Think of what that is for you, and commit this week to set it aside, leave it behind, confess it away. And then step into a new way of being, a way that leads you closer to God and God's goodness and mercy, closer to the life you were made to live. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

O Lord, too often we have become ensnared in the subtle lies of the enemy, relying upon human rules instead of embracing the Way, the Truth and the Life, which is Jesus Christ.

Open our hearts to hear and understand, for they have been dulled by the piercing loudness of a world gone mad.

Turn our thoughts to you, O Lord, that we would hear, so that our souls would live. For in you and through you alone is the life we seek.

Send your healing touch, we pray, upon those recovering from illness, injury and disease.

We pray, also, O Lord, for your comfort for Robbie Gorman and all the family of John Gorman. May they know and feel your peace, even amid their grief.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts, as we forgive
our debtors;
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory, forever. Amen.**