

Called To Be Doers of the Word

Rev. Dr. David Holyan

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, September 2, 2018

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-25

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, 'Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?' He said to them, 'Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines." You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.'

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.' For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.'

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.

James 1:17-27

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfilment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore 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.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words, the worries, the joys, the distractions that each of us have within, pray that you would take the words we offer in song and in prayer, I pray that you would take the beauty of the music and the Word read and the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share, take all of these and by the power and mystery of your spirit, transform

them into a living word, a word of Jesus Christ, and let that word do its work in our hearts and in our minds and in our souls and in our lives. Let that word be embodied by what we do and what we say. Let that word guide us and challenge us. Let us trust that word, spoken by you to each of us. We ask this in the faithful name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

So in the gospel reading that Karen shared, there's the obvious tension between following the rules and doing something new or different. Jesus, and especially his disciples, were constantly getting in trouble for not following the rules that the Jewish leaders expected them to follow. They did not do what tradition and their interpretation of the law said they should do, and so there was tension, confusion, frustration. And Jesus would often spend a lot of energy defending the disciples and telling those that were watching their every move and judging them to be unfaithful, that those who judge were the hypocrites. That the tradition was more important to them than the act of kindness that the disciples were offering. Not eating with clean hands is anathema to those who follow the rules.

And we don't really know the context of what Jesus and his disciples were up to when they were eating and possibly not having access to running water or a rag or whatever it was that their traditions said they should have available to them. Chances are that they were simply having a meal, that they were welcoming people into their midst and sharing what they had. And those who see themselves as defenders of the tradition, defenders of the faith, judge them to be unworthy.

In the writing of James, we see something a little different. We see that anger and judgment does not produce God's righteousness. That rather than talking and pointing out someone's faults, the word in James is that we need to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and even slower to anger because there's a decent chance that we don't understand all of what's happening in someone else's life. So the invitation is for us to hold our judgment, to lay it aside and to try to have the eyes of God's son when we look upon those that are around us, to try to have the eyes of faith and love and forgiveness when we look at someone else's existence or a particular incident that we have.

And let's face it, in today's world, it is not easy to have those kinds of eyes and to lay aside those kinds of judgments. And even worse for many of us, the judgments that we lay upon others are multiplied when we lay them upon ourselves. The words that come in or are in our head or arise from our experience about how we have done something often impede our growth and inhibit our ability to share God's love with those around us. And James seems to be telling us that it's up to us to get rid of that sordidness and rank growth of wickedness before we can welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save, restore, fulfill our lives, our souls, our very being. Clean up your mess and then allow the Word of Christ to be alive within you seems to be what James is pointing towards. Is that what he's telling us to do, that first, we have to clean up our mess and then we can be open to God's word?

I had an experience yesterday that made me rethink what it means to rid ourselves of sordidness and rank growth of wickedness. The prophet who taught me this lesson was the dog, Ella. 10 pounds of obnoxious type A personality who thinks that she's a 120-pound pit bull. We went out for the morning doodie around the backyard. Because there's a hawk that lives in our neighborhood, we hook her up to the leash. She's about the size of a meal. And I take her out and she kind of wanders around the back of the yard and I start to notice that some of the bushes that we hacked back years ago were now taking up about 6 ft of property at the back of our house.

We live near the high school. There's a power line that says where the backyard ends, and there's a fence that I think was installed in 1776 still there with bushes and branches growing through it. It's the only thing holding it up. But as we were walking around a gravel path that's near that space, I just noticed all these limbs reaching out, craving sunshine. and one of them caught my attention in particular. It was a tree that years ago we had cut down and left a three-foot stump about six inches across. Because some genius who

had just moved to Kirkwood-- or maybe had been there a while-- but he thought that he could just take a shovel and dig around that stump. And then pull it and get it out of the ground. I have a bad back now, but I could only imagine how bad it would have been if I had tried to do that. So we left it. We cut it down about three feet out of the ground and nothing-- I thought surely this thing will die and when it does then, at some point, we'll be able to get rid of it. No, it has branches on it that are about six feet long. It has leaves that look like it might become an oak tree or something huge. And all of them are just reaching into the yard trying to get more sunshine. And I think to myself, "Well, we've got to do something about this."

And then the dog goes around the corner to meet the neighbors dog, Henry, with who she is in love with. Henry is a 120-pound mutt, very well tempered, but always comes up and looks over the fence at me kind of straight in the eye. And little Ella is going crazy. As we rounded the corner, I noticed a weed that kind of looks like it has some kind of a tree quality. It has this weird bark on the stem and it has stickers that come out every now and then. And there were tiny branches with big, round leaves at the end. And it was probably about two feet tall. And I thought to myself, "I need to get some Roundup and squirt that thing and get rid of it." And as I thought about that my eye turned, and right in front of me, I realized was a 25-foot tree that I now got was a weed. It wasn't a tree. Because it was the same bark, the same stickers, and the same leaves. And I thought, "Oh my gosh. I can't believe that we have allowed this 25-foot tree to grow right on the edge of our property by Henry's fence and it's a weed. It's not even a tree."

So down it came. I went, got the saw, hacked it off about three feet because eventually, I'm going to get that stump out of there. And then I went in and got the extension cord and laid it all the way out to the back. And then I went and got the hedge clippers and plugged them in and just went to town. I'm clipping everything I can find that's sticking out. And there are branches and leaves falling everywhere. And somewhere between the sweat and the drops in my glasses and trying to get the big one cut off, I hear my wife tell me, "Are you crazy? Stop doing that!" And so I stopped.

Let me tell you, I was pretty proud of myself. I reclaimed at least four feet of the six. I got everything put away in the garage. I went down, took a shower, and sat down afterwards. And up on my whiteboard, I have notes about this passage in James. Notes about the fact that we need to rid ourselves of sordidness and rank growth of wickedness. And somehow I could see all of those leaves being the rank growth of wickedness and they were coming after me and that I had to get rid of them first in order to appreciate something much much more gentle and quiet. And I thought, "This just doesn't feel right." I don't know if any of us have the power or the discipline or the determination to get rid of all those things that come into our being. I know one practice that I have adopted is I've stopped listening or watching news on television. Instead, I've now subscribed to multiple newspapers and I decide when I'm going to read the articles. And based on the headlines, I decide if it's something that I should let in, set aside, or need to know. Because I don't know about you, but I'm pretty up to here with the discourse that's happening in our political sphere. The rank growth of wickedness.

So after that clipping experience and the whiteboard and sitting there and thinking about how there are so many things that are coming at us trying to distract us and get our attention and make us think about whatever it is rather than Jesus Christ and love and peace and liberty and blessing. On the other whiteboard are notes about a book group I'm doing in a couple weeks. And I kid you not, what it said on the whiteboard were ordinary, humble, and prayer. And the last word was pruning. Because the author, Robert Wicks, talks about the need for all of us to some pruning in our lives in order for the word of God to become more fully alive.

And I don't know about you but I'm not very bright but what I realize is it's probably not a good thing to spiritually take some hedge clippers to our life--to not go at ourselves that vigorously, to not be so indiscriminate when we're cutting-- "Just get rid of it, aargh." Back and forth. Spiritually we need to be more gentle with ourselves when we prune and allow space for Gods love to continue to grow within us. So

I just want to offer a brief process that all of us can do to allow that pruning to be done gently and to allow Gods love to be more active in our lives. A way that we might become doers of Gods word.

I get it from the Jesuit, Ignatius of Loyola, and it's called the Examen. Talked about it before, we'll talk about it again. It's a beautiful practice. At the end of the day, the invitation is for us to become aware of Gods presence. I'm going to translate this into modern terms for all of us. At the end of the day, shut off the television, shut off the cell phone, shut off anything that's making noise in your home, and just be there. And in that presence, in that awareness, in that stillness, even if it's just a minute or two, give thanks to God. A simple thank you. And then review the day. Look back on that one day, not all of it, one day, and ask yourself, "How did I do"? And chances are the first thing, if you're like everyone else, the first thing that's going to bubble up is something you wish you had done differently.

And what Ignatius teaches is to not immediately feel horrible and think, "Oh, I've failed." No, he teaches that our job is just to gently hold that failing and allow it to teach us and then to lay it aside. And then to allow the good thing that happened that day to come to our awareness. Maybe it's just the fact that the sun was shining or the coffee tasted good. Hopefully, it's more. But we allow that which was a shortcoming and that which was a blessing to be present to us. And the last step is that you pray for the next day. You look forward to what God is going to do through you in the day to come. By doing this we live our lives one day at a time. We're able to be doers who act and who are blessed in our doing. And not just that we blessed but we can bless others. So I invite you, like Ignatius, to find some stillness, to sit in prayer, and to allow Gods blessing to flow through you into the lives of others. Amen.