

Rooted in the Heart

Matthew 15:1-20

August 2020

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Tradition of the Elders

15 Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ²“Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.” ³He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴For God said, ‘Honour your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ ⁵But you say that whoever tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,’ then that person need not honour the father. ⁶So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God. ⁷You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said: ⁸‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; ⁹in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’”

Things That Defile

¹⁰ Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand: ¹¹ it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” ¹² Then the disciples approached and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?” ¹³ He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.” ¹⁵ But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.” ¹⁶ Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷ Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰ These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

Intro

This is amazing Jesus cutting through the nonsense, the deception and the general fog of the human heart. I am aware that it is ‘cucumber time’ and we try to keep summer church light but friends, this passage is a full-blown BBQ feast for the soul of anyone passionate about Jesus and living his way.

In 2017 I got to enjoy a sabbatical in which I discovered an early French thinker and sociologist who studied religion. His name was Emile Durkheim and he offered an answer to the question: Why do people everywhere practice religion?

So, while other theorists say religion is about answering life’s mysteries and filling in the gaps and bringing comfort, Durkheim said religion was what enabled society. For people to live together they need a shared, world-view, they need shared customs, practices, narratives and values so as to enable life, art, and eventually, civilization to flourish.

I think that is recognizable - especially when religion gets organized. Some people really invest in religion because of this and defend its value, even in a world where there is much hostility to religion.

Text

The scene we have just heard from Matthew’s Gospel shows Jesus ploughing into religion as Durkheim described it – as social glue. The Jewish people were ‘religious’ in various senses of the word. Jesus treated it all as a piece of fruit where you consumed and swallowed one part but peeled off or spat out another part. That is what I hear from him in the two engagements in today’s gospel, firstly with the learned Pharisees and then with his down-to-earth disciples.

The phrase that stands out in his conversation with the Pharisees is ‘tradition of the elders.’ The Pharisees took seriously the received ethics and practices of previous generations. These traditions were powerful. They held them dear and taught them on as requirements for others.

A good way to get traditional people to agree on what should be done is to say: This is what our ancestors, yours and mine, notable elders of the people, instigated and taught. That shared buy-in contributes to social cohesiveness, peace and harmony.

What Jesus noticed was that the Pharisees promoted these traditions even when they conflicted with the clear force of God's word in scripture. It was the Pharisees who raised the issue because the tradition of the elders was that the disciples of Jesus should wash their hands before eating or before other significant moments. This was a concern not because it broke God's command but because it could disturb the social order and even diminish the Pharisee's place in the established order. That's what church politics can be like too! Is it a God issue or a social-political one?

In response to this concern Jesus points out that the Pharisees were placing their collection of favourite traditions and practices over the clear ethical instruction of God's word. The case in point for Jesus is the obligation of children to care for their parents for which the Pharisees had established an escape clause as a legal technicality.

Jesus' perspective on this is clear:

⁶ So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God.

⁷ You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said:

⁸ 'This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
⁹ in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.'"

Jesus avoids religion as Durkheim the sociologist described it and focused on the human heart:

- That place of central decision which we live out of.
- That place where our deepest loves direct our lives,
- And often a place of disorder and disease.

Rather than attend to the outward ordering and shared conventions that are bundled in religion, Jesus focused on the place where God and Person meet, where deep calls to deep amidst the thundering of many waters.

Defilement

To consider the state of the heart he takes up the category of defilement. Let me ask:

Q. Have you ever felt dirty?

A. I have. It's that sense of shame, guilt and yuk following something that stays with you until... until...

Some cultures and consciences are more concerned about this than others. It's a bit like no brain no pain. But I suspect that even secular people who reject the sacred can experience defilement.

As mentioned before, the most common archeological feature in the environment of Jesus' first century environment were baths for ritual bathing, the *mikvoth*. In Jerusalem, Masada, Essene settlements, Galilean towns, I saw large square baths with steps cut out of the limestone. Ritual purity was a big issue in Jesus' day. Being pure before God was a big part of being holy.

So with the issue of hand washing just raised Jesus continues to explain this to his puzzled disciples:

"Listen and understand: ¹¹ it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles."

The disciples are not yet at that level of understanding and need help so they ask a less important question:

¹² ... “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?”

Their minds track back to the social disruption Jesus just created by saying things that offended the venerable Pharisees. Jesus might be about to get diplomatic advice?

His reply is profound in two parts. Firstly:

¹³ ... “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted.

What a statement!

What comes out of the mouth is determined in the heart.

In terms we may know from other agricultural parables, the heart may hold either-or wheat and weeds. It can be a cocktail of life impulses that find expression through the mouth. Sometimes even defiling the person through their own words that rise from the heart.

God’s path to purity is like the gardener - uprooting anything in the heart that God did not actually plant. God seeks is a heart planted exclusively with what God seeds there.

So, don’t even think of adding to God’s word with your own ideas! It only produces weeds that will then defile through the mouth. The heart surrendered to God is a weed-free garden of his planting.

The second thing Jesus offers before explicitly decoding the whole message is some advice in relation to the Pharisees.

¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.”

That seems dismissive and uncaring as if saying, don’t water weeds, just let them fade away. I hear the implication being to attend to your own heart and what needs uprooting there.

As we near the end of the passage the disciples still don’t get it so Jesus spells it out in physiological terms they cannot miss as everyone knows about eating and going to the toilet.

“Are you also (*like the Pharisees*) still without understanding? ¹⁷ Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰ These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

Application

I try to listen to the heart - my own heart and the hearts of others. It’s about going beyond information to hearing what quality of life, mind and being is flowing from this person. Sometimes it is not pretty while other times it’s the sweet love of God.

I want to bring this home by describing two New Testament hearts I sometimes hear speaking in Trinity Church. Yes, it might be lockdown and we are socially separated but the ears still work. I say they are New Testament hearts which is true, but they are both problematic and not to be commended.

We met one already today. The Pharisee who practices faith and religion with reference to the details. Faith is rules referenced and being quick to judge. This is what Jesus found in strong measure in his day.

In this heart there are twists and coils whereby what the heart loves is achieved through religion. The real agenda of the heart is addressed in the business of religion realized through whatever political opportunities there may be at the time. It is in essence self-serving or human advancing but that is carefully camouflaged.

Until the 1970s or so most evangelists followed the New Testament message to reach pharisaic hearts with the gospel of grace. People in the West were often still moralistic with a Sunday School background and seeking to be right with God but through their own efforts and not through faith in Christ whom God would plant in heart. Grace is the antidote to legalism.

The hypocrisy Jesus so often blasted was when this self-serving heart practiced the forms of religion in such a way that it excluded or blocked out others. When people use religion to build status this is what can come of it. Jesus was highly critical of this.

Meanwhile at least in the West, the Pharisee has in my lifetime made way for the Epicurean which was more familiar in the world of St. Paul than of Jesus. This heart loves life: "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die." This is the heart for the consumer age.

While the Pharisaic heart is self-serving and uses religion as a path for advancement, the Epicurean heart just want to be happy, but here is the blind-spot. It so wants to be happy, secure, comfortable and entertained that if these things are not happening, then it concludes that something must be wrong! Do you hear it? I am not happy, therefore something must be wrong.

What the Pharisaic and Epicurean hearts both need is the Cross of Christ to be planted there. The defiling pride, cunning and self-centeredness needs to be broken by a vision of God's holiness and ourselves falling short of the glory. That can only be corrected in Christ.

It's so important to be self-aware of our heart but both the Pharisee and the Epicurean avoid such self-awareness. They make blind guides because they don't exercise the eyes of the heart.

This may all sound very vague and theoretical like the first chapters of Paul to the Romans but let me end with a very practical diagnostic tip for assessing how self-aware you may be. This would heal both the Pharisee and the Epicurean tendencies of the heart.

Something happens. Something happens that rocks you at the heart.

Q What do you do?

The Pharisaic heart considers what rule has been broken or what criticism can be visited on the source of the upset. This is closely followed by finger wagging!

What they do not do is consider themselves or speak from their wounded, bruised or indignant heart as a vulnerable authentic person. They do not share with anyone at that level.

They do not pray 139.23

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts.

Or Psalm 51.10

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.

When the woman caught in adultery was dragged before Jesus as a prelude to her being stoned, Jesus addressed those present by getting them to consider how qualified they each were to cast the first stone. He asked the angry male mob to consider their own purity and defilement. It was like a hot knife through butter - the power of making people self-aware!

The same applies to the Epicurean heart where something or someone is made the focus or justification for felt unhappiness. Then the mouth goes into gear and others are told about it. Really? Where is the process between some negative experience and finger pointing at another as if they are responsible for disturbed hearts?

Jesus painted a humorous picture about this. It involved a person with a log in their eye seeking to help someone with a spec in theirs. That visual absurdity happens because someone has lost touch with their own heart and only expresses themselves through considering others.

Conclusion:

Jesus is clear that defilement comes through what the heart expresses through the mouth.

I am saying that whether the heart is Pharisaic, Epicurean or something else, the way to overcome the power of what lives in our hearts is to examine our hearts and here it comes, speak about what happens there. Talk to God in prayer, share your heart condition with trusted others.

In modern categories I am simply advocating self-awareness and 'I statements'.

Both take courage and church is the place to practice it.

- So you are rocked by something or someone? Make it a priority to find your words to say:
"I am ... surprised,
- disappointed,
- sad,
- excited,
- concerned,
- upset etc. "

Always do that before you consider what rules may have been broken or who made you unhappy.

This is one way to avoid being blind to defilement or a blind guide.

I end with some words of encouragement:

⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.