

Sept. 2, 2018 with Baptism of Bailey Thomas Roberts
Chapel of the Resurrection
Preacher: Rev. James A. Wetzstein, University Pastor

First reading: Deuteronomy 4:1-2,6-9

¹So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. ²You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the LORD your God with which I am charging you. ⁶You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!" ⁷For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him? ⁸And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?

⁹But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children.

Gospel: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

The Holy Gospel, according to Mark:

¹Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, ²they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. ³(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴and 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.) ⁵So 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?" ⁶He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

'This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
⁷in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.'

⁸You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

¹⁴Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."

²¹For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²²adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, this (gospel) reading that I just shared might not strike you as especially consequential. What Jesus says to his critics seems correct on the face of it. And the sniping that the religious leaders do around Jesus -- and to Jesus -- is like an old, familiar story for many of us. One can almost hear Mark's disparaging tone as he makes his parenthetical remark about their obsessive practice of washing cups

and pots and kettles. And we can tell from this conversation that we're not just talking about doing dishes. And their behavior is a sort of behavior that may be for us hard to relate to. Not the washing itself; It's the imposition on everyone around them to wash. I mean, like, mind your own business! What I do with my hands and my pots, is my thing. You do you Pharisees, that's cool. So what Jesus says seems to be an obvious thing. You don't have to be the Messiah to call that one out.

When I imagine the chatter from the religious authorities around Jesus, it makes me think of gnats at a picnic. You know, they don't bite, so they're not particularly dangerous in the moment, but, boy, are they annoying! Like they just ruin the event. So yeah, we hear Jesus make his point. It doesn't seem to be particularly controversial or even eye-opening, except for the fact that what Jesus is saying seems to directly contradict what we heard in the first reading that Hannah shared, about always keeping the regulations of God. So maybe the problem of the Pharisees is the additive part. Maybe Jesus thinks that they are getting carried away or whatever.

So, what's next on the agenda for this morning? A hymn of the day. And then, the baptism. Now that's more fun! That's interesting. A student transfers to Valpo, in part, because of a growing interest in theology. While he's in his Christian tradition class, he's confronted with ideas and teachings that convince him that he needs to be baptized. That he wants to be baptized. And so he seeks out the University Pastor who begins to teach him the faith. This pastor also circles back around and fills the professor in that Christian tradition class in on the story, who then himself offers himself as a baptismal sponsor to this same student. And so all three of us are here this morning. Now that's a cool Valpo story. It's such a great story and the gospel reading seems so mundane we might miss the seismic shift that Jesus brings about when he teaches.

It doesn't help for your hearing this morning that what Jesus says and the importance of what Jesus says becomes really clear in some verses that were not included in those verses that were assigned to be read this morning. And I'm sorry for that. Sometimes, the editing is a problem. You can see in the service folder how the reading is cited. That we have "hop-scotched" our way through these verses in the seventh chapter of Mark. The first part of the reading where Jesus confronts the Pharisees about their criticism, about washing things, that's all there. But then we drop out a section where Jesus goes on to really challenge them about the inhumanity of their practices. And then we pop back in as Jesus makes this point to the crowd that's all gathered around. He says, "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".

And then after he teaches that to the crowd there's a location change that got edited out of our reading this morning. Jesus and his disciples go from that large-group conversation inside to a more private place and there the disciples ask him to describe, or explain, the parable. Now there's not really a parable here so we discover that they're using parable much more loosely than we're used to using it. So, describe this aphorism about what makes people unclean, Jesus. And this is where things get really interesting. In order for you to understand just how interesting it is, we have to take a moment this

morning, I know it's hot, but we have to take a moment this morning to talk about grammar. Particularly the grammar of questions. People who are native English speakers we catch these sudden grammatical shifts. We know when a question expects a particular answer, and when it doesn't.

Here are three examples: "Did you pick up the milk?" That's a simple question. It expects and welcomes either a yes or no answer. But listen to this: "You did pick up the milk, didn't you?" Now that expects "Yes, yes I did remember to pick up the milk". Now, hear this one: "You didn't pick up the milk, did you?" That expects "No, no, I'm sorry, I didn't pick up the milk".

The disciples ask Jesus a question and he responds with a question of his own. You didn't hear this one in the earlier reading but hear it now. This is what he says to them: "Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not go into his heart but into his stomach and then into the latrine?" Now the grammar of that question encourages the disciples to answer, "Yes, yes, we know all of that." But in fact, they have to answer "No. No, Jesus, we didn't know that. We didn't know that. We didn't know that because no one has ever said anything like this to us before. We didn't know that because our whole identity is wrapped up in keeping the law as described in today's reading from Deuteronomy. We didn't know that what can go into someone doesn't define them because, well Jesus you are blowing our minds."

Why is Jesus doing this? He's doing this because he is the long-promised one. He is the Messiah and as it turns out, you do need to be the Messiah to call the Pharisees out on this one! Jeremiah had long promised, "'This is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days' declares the Lord. 'I will put my law within their heart. I will write it, I will be their God and they shall be my people. They will not have to teach one another ever again saying "Know the Lord" because everyone will know me. From the least of them to the greatest of them. Because I will have forgiven their iniquity and because I remember their sin no more.'" The writer to Hebrews connects the dots for us when he quotes Jeremiah and he says, "This is what the sacrifice of Jesus is all about. Jesus, the anointed one, the Messiah, called for the purpose of making us clean before God, and calling us out of the rule of regulations and in to a rule of love".

The followers of the first covenant of Jesus had an inkling that this is what it was all about because they had distilled down the law of God. They recognized that it could be distilled down to love. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and your soul and your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. They just didn't know how profound that love was going to be. The unrelenting, self-emptying love of Jesus. So, Jesus, no, we didn't see that. We didn't know that. We didn't see that what goes into a person counts for nothing before God because what comes out of us, if it violates the rule of love, that's what risks doing damage. We didn't see it because we didn't see love coming at us from you. We didn't see it because we were too busy trying to be right.

You see, we're not initiating Bailey into a moral code this morning. We're not going to give him a list of rules and regulations by which he must order his life in order to be called righteous and worthy by God. We're formally initiating him into a relationship that he has already come to know through his reading of the scriptures, other Christian authors, and the mentorship of two older brothers in the faith. It's a relationship of love, born by the death and resurrection of Jesus. So today, we are initiating Bailey Thomas into the death of Christ. And from that death, will begin a life in which he is marked one of Christ's own brothers, brought and bought and beloved. This initiation is not going to make him perfect, not today. But it will bring him to the day of his own resurrection and full communion with God, and that day will be a day of perfect fulfillment. In the meantime, Bailey's going to join us in the eating and drinking that pilgrims do on their way to the glorious destination, and he will along with all of us, by the power of the Spirit, grow in love even as he grows in faith through the daily forgiveness of sins and his continual remembrance of what God has done for him this day. And that growth will be made manifest in his life in works of love, even as it is manifest in the lives of us all.

In the name of Jesus.
Amen.