

11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish,  
Saint Francisville, LA  
20 August 2017

Matthew 15:10-28

I want to start this sermon by thanking all of you for allowing my family and I to take a Sabbatical in Ireland. We tried very hard to miss you, but every time we felt sentimental we came across another pub. I don't know if this has ever happened to you, but I find it very difficult to be sentimental after I have had two or three Guinness. All joking aside, we had a fantastic time of ministry in two small churches in Country Kerry during weekends and we traveled throughout the Island and other parts of Europe during the weeks. I have read a great deal, I have rested, and I feel refreshed and ready to continue to minister among you for many more years. Now, let us talk about the Gospel assigned for today in our Lectionary.

We are in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew today. The passage begins at verse 10, as the lectionary does not give us the first nine verses. To understand the passage, however, we need to know about those verses. The chapter begins when some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus and asked, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat." This question tells us that this passage is concerned about ritual purity. The question is truly about what makes people clean or unclean in the eyes of the law. Jesus responds by calling these visitors from Jerusalem, "hypocrites". They are so concerned with rituals, like the purity rituals, but they forget about more important parts of the law. He gives them an example. The law demanded that people honor their father and their mother, but many of them had found loopholes that permitted them to neglect their duty to their parents. Jesus tells them they are the people against whom Isaiah said, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules." (Mt.15:8-9, Is. 29:13).

It is after this interaction with the Jerusalem visitors that Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into your mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." Later he adds, "What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and that is what defiles." The type of defilement Jesus is talking about is spiritual defilement. According to the religious authorities of the day, any failure to obey every single regulation of the law (about 613 regulations) defiled a person spirituality, making him or her unclean and impure. Jesus rejects this superficial understanding of the law that is mostly based on ritualistic behaviors, but does not address issues of the heart. For Jesus, it is not what enters the

mouth that defiles a person but, rather, what comes out. He gives a few examples: “Evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, false witness, slander.” All of these things defile the person and cause harm to others. He invites his hearers to pay more attention to the internal inclinations of their hearts than to the multiple rituals we humans devise to try to get God’s favor, to score points in some heavenly score card. True religion is not a checklist of things that must be done before we die, but a relationships with the God who loves us and cares for us. And, as we all know, relationships are a matter of the heart.

After Jesus finishes teaching about these matters of the heart, he travels to the region of Tyre and Sidon and encounters the woman whose daughter was ill. It is tempting to preach about that fascinating interaction between Jesus and this woman, but I want to stay briefly on these matters of the heart that cause defilement. It appears to me that many in our world are suffering from a dangerous heart condition. Over the last few years we have seen the return of many old hate groups around the world. The Neo-Nazis are gaining in numbers and power in several countries of Europe, especially in Germany, and here in the United States. White supremacist groups, famous for their violent resistance to the Civil Rights movement are also gaining in numbers. New chapters of the KKK can now be found in 28 different states according to news outlets. And, we all remember the trail of pain that group has left throughout the South since the group’s first appearance in 1866, when the group first organized against freed slaves. To these old enemies we must add the new enemies of the Islamic State, the Taliban, Boco Haram, and others. Not to mention the dictators of Venezuela, North Korea, and various parts of Africa. When we look at the totality of what’s going on around the world and in our own country, it is very apparent that we have a heart problem.

One of the most distressing realities for me as a pastor is to listen to the “Pseudo-Religious” rhetoric of many of these hate groups. Many of them believe they are doing God’s work. They take one or two verses of Scripture, often poorly understood, and used them as the basis for their hateful behaviors. They externalize their fears and sense of alienation and then claim they are doing God’s work because they can quote a poorly interpreted verse of Scripture. Let me just tell you what I mean about this. This last Friday, I read an interview with a White Supremacist leader who affirmed his group was doing God’s work. At one point he stated that Leviticus 19:18, where we can find the famous mandate, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” really means, “You shall love your neighbor of your own kin as you love yourself.” According to him, the commandment does not imply he should love Black or Latino people. Just the opposite, out of love for his own kin he must do all that he can to ensure minorities do not replace White Americans. This leader used one verse of Scripture, took it completely out of context, misinterpreted it to suit his hatred, and built a whole doctrinal system out of it.

Sadly, he is not alone. Many terrorists around the globe use Scripture and other Sacred Books of their own faiths to justify the violence and darkness of their hearts. My

daughter and I were in London just two weeks after the June 3<sup>rd</sup> London Bridge attack. As you remember, several terrorists drove a van into pedestrians on the bridge, after which they crushed the van, run into a pub on Borough Market, and stabbed a number of people indiscriminately before the three attackers were shot dead by police. By the end of the episode eight people had been killed and 48 people had been injured. Witnesses claimed that the three attackers kept chanting, “This is for Allah” as they stabbed their victims. My daughter and I visited the memorial of flowers and hundreds of posted notes at the base of the bridge. People from around the world wrote messages of support and defiance. Some messages had the generic, “Terror will never win!”, “Together with London”, and “We are London” messages. Others were detailed letters filled with pain and anger. There was a note of an 8-year old child which read, “My heart is broken. I just don’t understand why they did what they did. I am very sad and I am scared. I don’t know why God lets things like this happen.” The terrorists claimed they were doing God’s work, while some of those affected blamed God for allowing this hate-filled attack to happen.

Of course, just two weeks before London, we saw the attacks in Manchester at an Ariana Grande concert. This last week we saw the senseless attacks in Spain, and the marches in Virginia. It is very clear to me that we have a heart problem. Many religious people have forgotten that faith is a matter of the heart and not a list of chores. Many of the members of these terror and hate groups go to church every week, do their prayers, and read their Bibles, yet their hearts are filled with darkness and hatred. They have made religion a matter of duty and they believe their God has appointed them as judges over people they see as infidels, inferior, or somehow undeserving of God’s love and mercy. We have a heart problem and Christ is the only heart surgeon who can cure our condition. Only the one who loved to the end can teach us to love others. Only the one who died for his enemies can teach us to love those with whom we disagree. Only the one who took our sin to the cross can free us from our hatred, our arrogant discrimination, our intolerance, and our blaming others for our fears and sense of isolation.

We need Christ in our hearts and we need to preach Christ as the solution to the problem that afflicts the whole world. We as believers have a responsibility to spread love and to pray for peace. We must do our part to show the world that Christianity means love of others, commitment to the truth that only Christ can judge the world, and generous commitment to serve those in need, regardless of race or socio-economic status. We must show the world a different version of Christianity, one that cares more about matters of the heart than about checklists and rituals. May God continue to bless us. Amen!