

Pastor Colleen's Sermon of August 30, 2009

Grace, Peace and Mercy be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

We spend a lot of time washing our hands, our bodies, our cars, our pets, our food, our clothes, etc.

We spend a great deal of time every single day washing something so it will look good, look new, or be clean.

But we do not spend half as much time cleaning out what's on the inside.

For example...

My old car may have looked good and clean on the outside but on the inside it was a moving garbage can....

Filled with papers, empty water bottles, books, chairs, blankets, food, and one of our youth used to say... I'm sure there's a body behind that back seat.

But on the outside...the car was clean.

Additionally, my bedroom at home is pretty clean... the bed is made, the books are on their shelves, I have a few bills to be paid on my dresser, but all in all it looks pretty clean.

But open the door to my closet and you will find a floor full of shoes, blankets, a beach bag, boxes, and somewhere toward the back wall, a small snow shovel.

The outside...looks pretty clean... the inside... not so much.

Now, how true is this for most of our lives in general?

On the outside how are our lives looking?

Are they looking like we have everything together, our lives are full, everything is in place...

But on the inside are they feeling that way?

On the inside is there order, and fullness,

Or instead is it a cluttered, filthy mess?

Sometimes I think we should live our lives inside out.

Sometimes I think we should spend half the time cleaning up our insides so that they resemble somewhat our clean and squeaky outsides.

And I think that is some of what Jesus is trying to get the Pharisees to think about in this morning's gospel lesson.

You see, the Pharisees were all about the law.

And let's be clear there was and is nothing wrong with the law

But the issue Jesus was having with the Pharisees was that they were adhering to the law at the expense of others and of themselves.

They were so determined to follow the letter of the law that it was coming between them and God

You see, the law was a gift
 But instead the Pharisees were using it as a weapon to judge and condemn others who fell short of the law.

The Pharisees were so caught up in getting the letter of the law right that they were neglecting the very people the laws were supposed to protect.
 Instead of using the laws as a vehicle to care for people,
 the Pharisees were using them to define and label who was in and who was out.

The Pharisees were also trying to use their obsession with the law as a way to create this image that because they were so good at following the law they must look so good on the outside.

But Jesus sees right through this and names them as hypocrites.
 Jesus stands before them and tells them that in actuality it is their obsession with following the letter of the law that shows the world they are far from perfect.
 And in fact, if they would spend less time using the law to condemn people and spend more time helping people and serving others
 THEN their insides might actually start to resemble their squeaky clean exteriors.

So, what does that mean to us?
 how are we doing?
 Are we more interested in following the rules, and maintaining our traditions then we are in celebrating how those rules and traditions can serve God and our neighbor

This gospel lesson asks us to think about what we may be letting get in the way of our relationships with God...
 It asks us to stop being so caught up in looking good and instead
 It asks us to question whether or not our need to stick to the rules is drawing lines between us and the people of God?

Last week the Churchwide Assembly of the ELCA gathered to do the “business” of the church. Many votes and decisions were made by the assembly but none got more press than the vote to allow gay and lesbian rostered leaders who are in committed relationships the right to pastor a congregation.
 The debate around this issue has been going on for years.
 Task forces were assembled to come up with statements on human sexuality,
 Committees were formed to help folks talk through their questions, their concerns and their fears.
 The voices at last week’s assembly that rose to speak to this issue were many, diverse, and passionate.

And while it was a historic vote and one that was perhaps long overdue...
 No matter where you stand on this issue there was another question asked...
 Someone posed the question, “if we spent half as much time funneling our passion for this issue into feeding the hungry or ending poverty I wonder what the world would look like today?”

This morning Jesus is asking us point blank to look at what rules and laws we are getting so obsessed with that we are missing the larger commandment.
 What are we washing or cleaning up or making look just right that gets in the way of loving our God with all our heart and soul and mind and our neighbor as ourself?

You see, rules are good things.
 They create and maintain order.
 And rituals are good things as well.
 And if pouring water over our hands to remove dirt reminds us that we need daily, to wash our hearts, and practice generosity, kindness, faithfulness, humility, and fidelity then that is a good thing.
 If, on the other hand, we think the simple act of pouring water over our hands makes us acceptable before God then that is when we get into trouble.

The minister and author Frederick Buechner talked about this issue by imagining a young child learning to play the piano.
 He said, "The child holds her hands just as she's been told...she has memorized the piece perfectly. She has hit all the proper notes with deadly accuracy. But her heart's not in it, only her fingers. What she's playing is a sort of music, but nothing that will start voices singing or feet tapping."

When it comes to faith and life: Are our hearts in it or only our fingers?
 Are we allowing God's renewing grace to work in us from deep within?

Are we living our lives inside out...
 Are we allowing God's grace to clean us from the inside out...
 Are we allowing our hearts and our actions to lead our lives?
 Or are we just pouring water over our hands and wiping off the dirt while our hearts and actions lag behind?

Jesus is calling all of us this morning to remember that our devotion to God shows in our actions, our motives and our words toward one another.
 But most importantly our true worship and love of God is seen in how we love one another.
 Even and especially, when we don't agree with one another.

The Pharisees were good people.
 They really were.
 As a matter of fact, they were a lot like us.
 They wanted rules that were set in concrete.
 They wanted to know where the boundaries were.
 They wanted to be able to say, "These people are bad, these people are good.
 These people are acceptable; these people are unacceptable.
 These people are clean; these people are dirty."
 However the problem with that is where do we draw the line?
 And, when we draw a line, what do we do with Jesus' message that he has come not to call the well, but those who are sick?

Jesus, the Christ, the son of God was sent to live among us, heal us, forgive us, and die for us...
for our salvation

He loved us right to the cross and to death.

That is the greatest gift of all...

And it is one for which we cannot earn, we cannot be clean enough to pay for, and we cannot ever forget.

In case we missed it somewhere along the way,

In case we were so caught up in appearing to be the cleanest, most together, most perfect on the outside person we could be...

In case we missed it today's gospel reminds us that

THE ONLY THING GOD CARES ABOUT IS PEOPLE.

People who are acting out of the love that created them in the first place.

People who are so caught up by the love of God that they can't help but share the love of God.

And it doesn't matter who those people are, what they look like or what they've done.

Even if they are prodigals off in a foreign country spending all their time partying,

Back here at home there is a patient, loving, Divine Parent, waiting, praying, hoping...
ready to accept and forgive.

And if the prodigal child comes home smelling of the pigpen well then, that's all right.

The Loving Parent won't stand apart and order the prodigal to clean himself off.

The Loving Parent will run out and throw his arms around the prodigal child and welcome him home.

All because that's the Gospel!

Jesus is not just speaking to the Pharisees in today's story,

He is speaking to us all and he is calling us to open our eyes to the possibilities,

He is reminding us to stop considering the cost and the consequences and

To remember what makes us Christian is not ritual or customs,
what we eat or what we fear.

What defines us ultimately is our faith in the great redemptive love that calls us into being
and commands that we be reconciled with one another.

What defines us is the undying love of our Lord who took our brokenness to the cross and died
for our sins, and the sins of the world,

So we might be made whole.

That is what shapes us, defines us and gathers us together.

And it is our actions that speak to **that** love that truly matters..

So today let us set aside our human rules and definitions of what is right

Let us set aside our need to always look like we have it all together and are clean and perfect.

And let us instead embrace the love of God.

Let us act with our hearts....

Hearts that are filled with the compassion and love of One who never let rules or definitions get
in the way of showing mercy,

And let us go out humbly into the world to act with that kind of cleansing and healing love
Amen

May the peace of God which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen