

IT'S WHAT'S IN OUR HEARTS
22nd Sunday in OT, August 29, 2021
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Diane and I just returned from a vacation in Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, about an hour north of Green Bay in famous Door County. We saw a lot of sights, traveled into the tip of the peninsula, chartered a sailboat for a three-hour cruise around the bay, tasted plenty that the local restaurants had to offer and sampled beers from the regional breweries. Yes, it was a relaxing week... being amongst God's creations and simply taking it easy. Perhaps, the greatest blessing of all during those seven days was that we were disengaged with social media and the news.

We did not miss the constant barrage of negativity... the weekly kill rate in Chicago, the politics of red state vs blue, the endless this or that of COVID-19, what entertainer had what for dinner, wars in the Middle East, volcanos in Alaska, earthquakes in Haiti or wild fires in California, wokeness or the public fight over Critical Race Theory. As you know, I could do on and on. But, nope, we didn't miss the

pessimism one bit. Blissfully, on our trip, about the only TV station we received was Me-TV... and right about now, the peacefulness, kindness and hopefulness of Mayberry, the Waltons and Beaver Cleaver sounds pretty good. Of course, those are make-believe towns with make-believe families and in our world of reality, where it seems good can hardly shine through, I feel that we could use some peacefulness, kindness and hopefulness.

Today, our Gospel points out the many, many religious rituals that the Jewish people were highly encouraged to followed... almost as pseudo law. Originally intended for priests, the cleansings and purifications morphed into what St. Mark calls the “traditions of the elders.” There we so many rules that the average believer on the street didn’t even know why they were doing this practice or that practice. They became meaningless gestures that did nothing more than take away from the right worship of God.

There was a long list of things that would make an individual unclean requiring ritual purification... some of these are detailed in our Gospel. Others include touching a dead body or anything that had touched a dead body, touching a dead animal not killed as an offering, a woman who give birth to a son is unclean for seven days... a daughter, 14 days... there were even levels of uncleanness... Leviticus (11) includes a catalog of “clean foods” vs “unclean foods.” There were even laws regarding when a married couple could have relations. Mind boggling for sure, and that’s for us today, let alone those of Jesus’ time that attempted to meet these guidelines.

When asked about these traditions, Jesus quotes Isaiah. He essentially tells the Pharisees and scribes, to include the crowd surrounding him, that while they say they worship God, Jesus says that they are too focused on rules, traditions and laws... human things that do nothing to help them to keep God’s greatest commandment to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” (Matthew 22:37). Jesus goes even further,

summoning *everyone* around him. He tells the crowd that external things themselves do not defile making a person unclean or separated from God. It's once these things enter the heart that they *can* transform and separate one from God's love. What does this mean for us today? It's really quite dramatic. Have you ever been cut off in traffic only to respond with your own curse words and finger gestures? How many are warped by video games only to respond with violence or bullying in school? How many are numb to value of life only to cancel it with murder? How many feel jealousy and envy over what another has only to steal it? How many are addicted to pornography, gambling, drugs or alcohol depicted as acceptable behavior in entertainment only to have it tear apart one's family and community? Today, Jesus gives us a warning... be aware of the evil in our world and be warned that our hearts can twisted by these things turning us unclean, evil and separated from God. Remember, the thing itself isn't evil... it's when we take these things into our hearts and souls that there is potential for us to spew forth evilness.

So, what is one to do? Our world, after all, is not Mayberry... it tends to be a violent place certainly not the Eden that God planned. Are we destined to have bad influences beat us down little by little? The short answer is, "No!"

Look around at where you sitting. In God's house. If Jesus is telling us that letting in evil can make us evil, then, conversely letting in good can make us good... and, that, that leads to love of God. You are to be commended. You are here today to let in the joy of this faith community. You are here to listen to the hope in God's words. You are here to talk with God to let in his unbridled love. You are here to sing and let in the voices of angels. And soon you will let in the greatest perfected love of all, the very presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. We come each week to cast away the darkness, push away the evil and to have our souls recharged by the love and light of Christ.

At the dismissal, you are encouraged to “Go forth and announce the Gospel of our Lord,” that is the Good News of the Messiah’s resurrection! You are a beacon of hope to those distressed. You are a light to those in darkness. You are a hand-up to those down-trodden. You are the light, love and hope of Jesus in a cruel world. Take great joy in being a disciple of Christ as you let in the goodness that truly is the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit!