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September 2, 2018

“Faith That Works: Lip Service”

Song of Solomon 2:8-13 Mark 7:1-23 James 1:17-27

INTRODUCTION TO SONG OF SOLOMON 2:8-13

We’ve been following the life of Solomon. We’ve read about his being given the gift of discernment and wisdom. Last week we read Solomon’s prayer to dedicate the Temple he built. This morning we’re going to read some of his poetry. Hear the word of the Lord from Song of Solomon 2:8-13.

INTRODUCTION TO MARK 7:1-23

In the 7th chapter of Mark Jesus is confronted by a group of people who are more concerned about the letter of the law than the spirit of the law when it comes to table manners. Jesus is more concerned about what comes out of people’s lips than what goes into them. Hear the word of the Lord from Mark 7:1-8, 14-15; 21-24

Let’s pray. Dear Lord, We want to honor you with our lips AND our lives. Thank you for this, your word. Open our eyes to see, our minds to understand, our hearts to receive so we may respond to this your word through the power of your Holy Spirit. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

We’ve all heard the saying, “You can’t judge a book by its cover.” Really it should be you shouldn’t judge a book by its cover because it is very possible to judge a book by its cover. To judge a book by its cover would be like a woman who was ashamed to be caught reading a romance novel and put her book inside a Bible Cover. You could judge the book she was reading by the cover, but you would be wrong.

To judge a book by its cover is to decide on what’s inside a book without ever looking inside. (Like the bit that Fred Armisen does with Seth Meyers when Fred is the guest drummer on Late Night.) Like the headwaiter of an elegant restaurant, some want to be "holy bouncers," who stand at the velvet rope and decide who is acceptable and who is unacceptable in God’s family.

In our lesson for today from Mark’s Gospel, the Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were "unclean," that is, unwashed according to the method prescribed by...the Pharisees. They were judging Jesus and his disciples by their “cover” --by what they could see on the outside.

So they asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with unclean hands?" Jesus recognized their hypocrisy.

Jesus replied, 'Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. The only service you are rendering is... lip service.

Jesus is saying, "Don't judge your devotion or other's devotion to God by how clean your hands are. Your devotion to God shows in your ethics, your attitudes, your motives, and most importantly, your devotion to God shows in your love for others."

Earlier this year I got the summons for jury duty, this time for my first time in Baytown. Of all the times I've received a summons I've never been chosen to serve. I think that prosecutors think that pastors might be too merciful. This time, not only was I chosen to serve, I was elected to be the foreman of the jury...

The defendant chose to represent himself. It was a bad choice. When we the jury were dismissed to deliberate it was obvious to us that he was guilty. His own defense proved it. It was a traffic accident the video he provided as evidence proved he was in the wrong. It didn't take us long to come to a unanimous verdict and assess the maximum fine allowed. As the foreman it fell to me to pronounce the verdict. I was the one who said the words, 'We the jury find the defendant guilty.'

What was the defendant's reaction? He said, "I'm going to appeal."

We the jury, the witnesses, the attorney, and the judge will never get those 3 hours back.

My role as foreman of the jury was to announce the verdict. The judge prole is to reside over the trial, and see to it that those presenting the case do so according to the law. The judge waits to hear the verdict of the jury, but then the Judge is the one who passes the sentence.

When Jesus tells us not to judge others he is saying Jesus is saying, "Don't pass sentence on someone else. Don't give up on someone else. That's not your job!"

The Pharisees wanted to know where the boundaries were--these people are bad, these people are good; these people are acceptable; these people are unacceptable; these people are clean; these people are unclean, these people are the evil doers, and these are the good-doers. The problem was ...they were passing sentences. They were giving up on people because they didn't wash their hands the right way!

They were concerned about hand washing when at the same time they were washing their hands of their responsibility to care for their parents. Jesus quoted the law to THEM about honoring their parents and yet they had written in a loophole in the law called Corban, where they could declare the money they were

supposed to use for the care of their parents to the temple, *which sometimes somehow ended up in their own pockets??*

Their question of Jesus is especially pointed when we read that they have just come from Jerusalem. Most likely, they had to pass through the large marketplace there. In the marketplace, they would have come into contact with Gentiles, people like us--non-Jews. This contact with non-Jews made them ritually unclean. Before they could be acceptable in God's sight again, they had to wash away the "Gentile Contamination," They didn't want to be tainted by contact with people like you and me. Yes, WE were once on the outside looking in.

When you start drawing lines, when do you stop? What do we do with Jesus' message that he has come not to call the well, but those who are sick? And what do we do with the fact that Jesus came to CHANGE evil doers to people who do good? Jesus came to move people from being more than hearers of the word but also doers of the word? How can change take place if those who do good don't or won't associate with those who do evil?

The verses from James' letter suggest that we be "quick to listen and slow to speak and slow to anger."

So often, listening and hearing do not happen between persons -- despite all the talk and emphasis placed on communication today. Our technology has provided us a means to listen in the depths of oceans, listen to distant planets, and listen for the first signals from extra-terrestrial beings. We can even look at and listen to a baby in the womb. We can listen to our own brain-waves, but we seldom listen to each other.

In studying the earthly life of Jesus we are deeply touched with his marvelous ability to listen. While his disciples were arguing and talking, Jesus was listening to the deeper needs of them and of the people whom they encountered.

Jesus was quick to listen. He traveled the same roads and village streets as his contemporaries. Yet he heard and saw needs which no one else seemed to notice. His authentic love for people motivated him to listen not only to words but to non-verbal communication. He was constantly meeting people at a point of need whether it was the Samaritan woman at the well or Zacchaeus who was up a tree. He listened. All of us need someone to listen and hear us.

But what about slow to speak? Another James, James T. Clellan, a Presbyterian minister, says, "We are living in an age of "gobbledegook," "bafflegab", "officialese" with its abandonment of simplicity, its pseudo-learned vocabulary, its capacity to abuse, to mutilate, even to murder the King's English."

When we are slow to speak, we don't contribute to the gobbledegook, bafflegab

and officialese which is drowning us in words. Some of us may be slow to speak, but some of us are quick to text...quick to type... And quick to typecast.

What about slow to anger? It doesn't mean we do not arrive at anger. There are some things that we ought to be angry about—hunger in the world, human trafficking, the fact that mass murders are continuing and even increasing,. James wants us to beware of getting to anger quickly, flying off the handle, responding in a fit of rage.

Jesus expressed his anger in the temple, but his response was measured and designed to make his point. He was also angry at those who would question people's faithfulness based on how or whether they washed their hands and at those who wrote loopholes for themselves to avoid taking care of their aging parents ...and didn't do much to help widows or orphans like James described as true religion..

People make bad choices, to be sure. Almost always there is a consequence for those choices. It's our business to help them put their lives back together again. It doesn't matter who they are, what they look like or what they've done. Even if they are off in a far country giving themselves to riotous living, there is a patient Loving God, and hopefully a forgiving welcoming congregation at home, waiting, praying, hoping, ready to accept and forgive.

Let me ask you, where will people today be touched by Jesus if not through us? More hurting, distressed people need to know Jesus today than ever before. Where can they go? Where can they turn? Can we truly visualize the church, not the church building, but the church which includes all people who love Christ who reach out to people who do not YET know Christ? Can we truly visualize ourselves as Christ's body, reaching out to touch, and allowing ourselves to be touched by broken people today?

Unlike the woman who hid her romance novel inside a Bible cover we are the people who have discovered that the Bible **IS** a romance novel. It is the story of a romance between God and the people that God has loved and continues to love and will love. It is the story of a people who are not worried about how or whether people's hands are washed. It is a story of people who honor and support their parents rather than look for a way to avoid the responsibility of caring for them in their old age. It is a story of people who are quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger and who live out true religion which involves caring for widows and orphans in their distress. It is a story of people who are not only hearers but also doers of the word. It is a story of people who put away the evil intentions that produce the fruit of fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, and folly. It is a story of people who are more concerned about what comes out of their lips than what goes into them-- who offer God far more than "lip service." It is the continuing story of people who have ... faith that works.

Let us pray.

Lord we want our mouths to show forth your praise. We want our lips to speak words of consolation and comfort. We want our hands to reach out in compassion and care. We want to offer you more than lip service. We want to offer you life service. We thank you that You expanded your Family Circle to include people like us. Don't let us close it to keep others out.

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