

Sermon Sunday 9 1 & 2 18

Even the simplest things can have significance. I love the cover for our program today. I'm not sure what translation of the Bible this is from, but it's clear and plainspoken.

"You are not defiled by what you eat; you are defiled by what you say and do."

It seems pretty obvious doesn't it? So -- Putting it in modern language on this Labor Day weekend -- Cheetos can't define us. Mean-spirited thoughts, actions and words do.

In our first reading today, Moses seemed to be saying: "Look at all these laws! They make you great!" But he isn't. It isn't just about the law. He is pointing out to the people of Israel that their relationship with God is totally different from the relationship that any of the other peoples they have met have with their gods. The people of Israel – their statutes and ordinances are about staying close to God, being mindful of God, remembering that God is always mindful of them. Their rules are about staying in touch.

Moses tells them, "For what other nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him?" They could talk to God. All other nations had to use intermediaries – special priests, special sacrifices, special mumbo-jumbo. And most of the time, those other gods didn't even listen to them or give any indication that they cared about them at all. Yaweh was the first and only god who cared, who paid attention to the needs and desires of his creation. From the time of Abraham – Abraham walked and talked with God. No other peoples had chatting relationships with their gods. Their gods were distant in every way. Our God is the one and only God.

Moses knew that the people of Israel were about to step out of the protective isolation of the wilderness and come into contact with people unlike themselves. He was concerned that they keep the unique identity they forged in the wilderness, that they never forget who they were – who they are.

The apostle James was also teaching all those who followed the Way of Jesus Christ to never forget who they were – what they had been taught – what set them apart. They had heard the Word. Now James asked them, and us, to be doers of the Word. It's not enough to hear, we must also do. It's not enough to say who we are. We must be who we are. Otherwise, James says, we forget who we are and are like people who see themselves in a mirror but the minute they step away, they forget what they look like. If we don't act

as Christians, we can forget we are Christians. Being a good Christian takes practice. We need to keep our skills up!

When James seeks to define what it means to be religious, he defines it as action, for example, “to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” He means caring for each other, out of our love for Jesus and Jesus’ love for us. He knew the actions of these new Christians would define, inform and teach them, just as we know that our actions define, inform and teach us.

When I read our gospel for today, my first thought was “Well, of course!” Of course we should wash our hands before eating – especially if we’re eating with our hands! And everyone I know rinses food off before eating or cooking it. That’s just common sense. And I wash my dishes! (Or Brad does!) None of us would eat off dirty plates or cook with a dirty pot. No way!

But that’s not what the Pharisees were talking about. I think we can assume that most people in Jesus’ time washed their food before eating it – and they probably washed dishes and utensils before using them.

But apparently Jesus’ disciples were clearly not following the prescribed *ritual*, approved by the Pharisees, for washing. For all we know, they did wash their hands, just not in the prescribed ritual way.

Bottom line, what the Pharisees were accusing the disciples of doing was not behaving specifically like good Jews. And what Jesus saw was that for the Pharisees, the ritual actions were not about declaring and acting upon their faith. No. They were empty actions. He saw the Pharisees claiming these rules as ends in themselves – that washing your hands in a certain way was the most important thing you could do – and then it stopped there. The action loses its meaning when it becomes an end in itself. Jesus saw the hypocrisy in this. This wasn’t a matter of identity, this was a matter of show.

It’s so easy for our actions in the church to become significant in and of themselves. And then it’s so easy for them to lose their significance. No. I don’t raise my hand and pronounce forgiveness after we all say the Confession together because of Confession and Absolution choreography. No – I raise my hand and pronounce forgiveness because I sincerely believe God forgives us our sins and I am here to remind you of that – with words and actions. We’re all about words and actions in the Episcopal Church. What was it

Shakespeare said? “Suit the action to the word and the word to the action.” But in the church, we can capitalize the word “Word.” Jesus is the Word. So Jesus’ direction is, “Suit your actions to the Word,” to Jesus.

What Jesus wanted people to understand is that it wasn’t about good hygiene (although that certainly is important!) It’s about setting the table reverently, giving the bread and the wine importance, and then blessing the bread and the wine so that it has meaning and becomes a gift from God. “We pray you gracious God to send your Holy Spirit upon these gifts that they may BE the sacrament of the Body of Christ and his blood of the new covenant.” Unite us with Jesus so that we too may become sanctified by your Holy Spirit. Bring us all together!

That’s what all those gestures and those words are about. It’s important when we come here together to let the Holy Spirit fill us and work through us so that we become the joyous presence of Christ in the world.

“You are not defiled by what you eat; you are defiled by what you say and do.”

Who we are is about how we live.