

August 29, 2021

After five weeks in the gospel of John, we're back in Mark!

In our lesson today, the good religious people, the Pharisees and scribes notice that the disciples aren't washing their hands before they eat! And that's a big no, no...

From their perspective, this is a matter of disrespecting scripture and tradition. They are offended, and they want Jesus to know it!

Jesus responds by saying "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines."

Jesus seems to say that there is a difference between what is of God, and then what is of Human origin and desire... In other words, we must always be in discernment, humbly using our judgment to find the difference. Is this of God, or is this about me...

And Jesus gives us some criteria... In the gospel lesson Jesus draws a contrast between the disciples eating without washed hands, and the behavior of the Pharisees and Scribes.

Jesus points out, "it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come:" Jesus then specifically mentions a good long list and ends with envy, slander, pride and folly...

For Jesus, is all a matter of judging with the heart. And it can either be life giving, or it can be cruel and destructive.

So, the ultimate test of Christianity, is how it creates loving, kind and gracious people... In other words, the proof is in the pudding, they will know we are Christians by our love...

Quick story... I had a good friend at the previous church, his name was Joe... He was as faithful as the day was long... He was an usher at the early service, a servant leader, one of those guys who always showed up to help, and happy and willing to do it!

He was also a member of the Legion's color guard; and so he attended a lot of funerals... I loved those guys, so faithful and honoring...

One Sunday morning, we were visiting in the back, he teared up and told me he had cancer. He was going to have surgery that week... That began a long journey together.

The surgery did not go well... They did not get all of it... He started with chemo and some experimental drugs... Then there was a second surgery, this time in Rochester which also didn't go well. Not only did they not get all of the cancer, they nicked one of his intestines.

He started to become septic, and he needed yet a third emergency surgery, stat! His wife called me at midnight, wondering if I could pick her up and bring her to the hospital.

We waited together for hours... Not sure if he was going to make it or not... Finally, we received word that he survived, but because it was extensive abdominal surgery, it would be months before it would be healed.

Eventually he was released from the hospital to a nursing home, and within a day he fell and broke his hip. Again, back to Rochester, and lots of questions about what to do.

The doctors weren't sure he could survive yet another surgery. And the cancer had metastasized, it had spread to some of his vital organs, it was at a point when they didn't know if there was any more, they could do...

Between the cancer, the abdominal surgery and then a broken hip, he was in a bad way...

The question facing them, came down to whether to continuing some cancer treatment, and hope for a miracle, or enter hospice and focus on palliative care, and letting the cancer run its course. Tough choice...

Now, entering a hospital room is always a different experience... You never know what you're going to encounter. Some people might have just received bad news! Some people might have had a new baby! Believe me, it's always anything and everything and you have no idea what you're walking into.

So, it was one Thursday afternoon when I walked into Joe's hospital room. There was a hospital Chaplain there, he had obviously been there for a while... and he was literally arguing with Joe to hold on to life, he wanted him to choose the cancer treatment...

And Joe was angry, he was agitated, all red faced and started arguing and quoting scripture at him, "there's a time to live and a time to die." The Chaplain looked mortified!

I then gently reassured Joe, that indeed, that was a conversation he needed to have between himself and God, and no one else... And you could see the agitation slowly leave and he laid back and closed his eyes...

And I think the Chaplain had a little epiphany, he looked a little embarrassed and excused himself...

I then spent a good long time with Joe and his wife... We said some prayers... Reassuring them of God's promise of love and resurrection... It was a sacred afternoon.

I ran into the same Chaplain, several weeks later... He remembered me and the situation... He was apologetic, and thanked me for intervening... I think he understood he had crossed a line between what was life giving, and what was his personal ideology.

I would see him later, on occasion, around the hospital and he would always greet me with open arms and tell me how much he appreciated my words and ministry that day...

Well, to finish the story, my friend, Joe did pass away shortly after that. And I'll always remember his funeral at Fort Snelling, full of life and the promise of resurrection.

The man who was so faithful in his service to honor countless other military personnel, was given the very same honor and respect.

And there certainly was a healing that was deeper than death.

The good news today is that Jesus judges to be loving, kind, and gracious... To find the life-giving way forward. And as Luther would say, "here on earth, and here after in eternity."
Amen...