

Matthew 15: 10-20 "What Comes Out of the Mouth" Rev. Janet Chapman

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A story is told about a trucker who had away from his family way too long and was lonely. He sat down at a little café to eat and the waitress asked, "What would you like?" He responded, "I want some spaghetti and a few kind words from another human being. I've been on the road for weeks." The waitress soon returned with his order, set it in front of him, and turned to leave when Joe said half-joking, "Hey, what about my kind words?" She leaned down to his ear and whispered, "Don't eat the spaghetti."

At the heart of our scripture today lies a proverb: "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out." Jesus often coined short sayings that shed light on specific situations. Here, Jesus is countering the Pharisees' criticism of his disciples for not following prescribed rituals for pre-meal hand washing. It is helpful to know that Jewish customs were not only to wash hands but wash things from the market before eating, wash cups, pots, and kettles as well as keep certain foods separated. On the surface, it sounds quite reasonable and advanced to a society that had no scientific understanding of germs. But Jesus understood that words, and the mannerisms attached to them, can be quite hurtful, as is the case when the Pharisees judged the disciples. In the height of COVID, when all of us felt like we had been on a lonely road too long, people lost sight of the value of the safety rules for the whole community and focused more on their own personal, individual rights to do whatever they wanted, sometimes quoting this very story. The problem is that the broader context of the story got lost in the argument. The Pharisees were ultimately criticizing Jesus' disciples for not observing the Pharisaic Judaism

rules for what one could and could not do on the Sabbath and for associating with those they viewed as unclean. Yet, the spirit of such rules was to keep the inward heart focused on the heart of the Torah through such external rituals like hand-washing and avoiding the unclean, rather than lifting up one's individual importance. The Pharisees were tasked with guiding the Jews to be mindful of their duty to God and neighbor while immersing themselves in the details of daily life. But Jesus knew something the Pharisees unfortunately had missed, even the best-intentioned observances can become corrupted. They can become substitutes for devotion to God while our hearts are occupied with thoughts that promote our self-agendas, lift up our importance, discount the value of community, and whittle others down to size. Take for example, the spouses who were discussing the possibility of a trip to the Holy Land. One spouse asked the other, "Wouldn't it be fantastic to go to the Holy Land and stand on Mt. Sinai where Moses stood and should out the 10 Commandments to everyone down below?" The other spouse responded, "Yeah, but wouldn't it be better if you stayed home and kept them?" What comes out of the mouth can be harmful in a variety of ways. 90% of friction in relationships is caused by the wrong tone of voice which begs the question which spouse was right in the eyes of God, if either? It is possible to honor God with our lips while our hearts are far removed.

Jesus' saying on the front of your bulletin is called a paradoxical proverb, meant to undercut the way we habitually look at things. Alyce McKenzie notes that conventional wisdom, whether biblical or contemporary, usually pairs good behavior with good results, such as "A penny saved is a penny earned" (Proverbs 11:28b). Granted the proverb dates way back to when pennies had far more

worth than now, but the truth is still evident. Conventional wisdom also pairs foolish behavior with horrific results, such as coined by computer operators, "Garbage in, garbage out." A biblical example might be, "Those who trust in their riches will wither..." from Matthew 11. The Native American tradition taught of the dangers of "speaking with a forked tongue." This image always made an impression on me as a child as I imagined words heading off in two directions after leaving such a tongue. Their sender didn't care about the recipient. In fact, the actual agenda of the sender was to manipulate and control the recipient, to cater to the sender's will. This is what is known as conventional wisdom. In contrast, Jesus' proverbs sometimes pair something we normally view as good with ruinous results, "Those who want to save their life will lose it...Whoever wants to be first must be last." He pairs what we would view as negative things with positive results. "Those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." Our proverb from today is one such paradoxical proverb. These sayings shake up our conventional worldview and point us toward unorthodox, but faithful, attitudes and actions.

In the movie "As Good as it Gets," actor Jack Nicholson plays Melvin Udall, an obsessive compulsive author of more than 60 romance novels. He lives alone in an exclusive New York City apartment and is a busy man. Several hours a day, he spends writing about love and romance. He also spends a lot of time making sure he doesn't step on the cracks in the city sidewalks nor touching or being touched by anyone walking along the crowded streets. Another of his favorite pastimes is insulting everyone, whether they are his gay neighbor or Jewish patrons who dare to sit at his favorite table at his favorite restaurant. When anyone tries to have a humane conversation with him, he proves to be the

world's poorest listener. So absorbed is he with protecting his personal world from contamination that he checks out of conversations when they don't directly concern him or his needs. Then there is daily hand washing ritual. In his medicine chest is row upon row of gleaming amber bars of antiseptic soap, wrapped in cellophane, never before touched by human hands. During the ritual, he goes through several bars of soap, swiping each one once across his palms before discarding it and unwrapping another. His character spews out verbal garbage that wounds others while his hands are clean enough to eat off of. Jesus say, "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth that defiles." The whole plot of this movie can be summed up as Mr. Udall gradually living his way into the truth of this pithy, pungent saying of Jesus'. Jesus invites us to look out over the expanse of our culture, our church, our community and national leaders, and our personal lives to see if there are any situations that stand in need of such a pithy, powerful challenge? Dare I say just 30 minutes of national news alone proves this scripture is still relevant today?

In Mikayla's college sophomore and junior years, Mikayla had a Jewish female roommate. This person became a personal favorite of Mikayla's while in the dorms at Chapman University. As they became friends and shared in their respective faith traditions, I came across a story out of Penn State University. Debbie, a small town student from rural Pennsylvania, and Laurel, a Jewish student from New York City, had become favorite new friends and roommates. In their first week of school, Debbie leaned over in the lunch line and whispered to Laurel, "Did you know that there were some Jewish girls in our dorm?" "Really?" Laurel said, in pretend surprise. "Yes," said Debbie. "I'm kind of glad I

didn't get one as a roommate, I never saw one before. I wonder what they look like." Laurel said, "I bet you'd be surprised." Jesus insists that harmful words express hurtful intentions that lead to harmful deeds. Scripture supports this with its catalogue of murderous, adulterous, false and thieving words. "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." What we eat is processed through our bodies and eliminated into the sewer. This is a more complicated kind of waste management, one which we often oversee poorly, with the result that lots of verbal sewage flows into our streets. What we say comes straight from our hearts. For Jesus' listeners, the heart was not a bodily organ separate from the mind, but the actual home of emotions, intellect, will, and spiritual life. Our words come from our hearts and often head straight for the heart of another. "Blessed are the pure in heart," says Jesus, "for they will see God." The Greek adjective for "pure" has connotations in the Second Testament of "clean," as in the clean linen shroud which wrapped Jesus' crucified body. The pure in heart are those who are spiritually pure, spiritually clean, rather than ritually or ceremonially clean. It is from a pure heart that kind words come that are long overdue. Jesus is saying, "Blessed are those who seek to be innocent of moral failures and evil intentions." Centuries before the advent of annual health check-ups, Jesus recommends that we all get our hearts checked out.

Laurel, the Jewish roommate from Penn State, had decided that her roommate wasn't being malicious but just had a sheltered life. When Debbie realized her mistake, she came to Laurel and apologized profusely. "I'm so embarrassed. I wouldn't blame you if you never wanted to talk to me again." Laurel replied, "I just figured this was beyond your experience, and once you

learned more, you'd realize we're people just like you." Debbie said, "Thanks for the benefit of the doubt and can I have a second chance – still friends?" Laurel nodded, "But the next time you hear somebody say something anti-Semitic, you're going to speak up, right?" Her new friend nodded vigorously. Jesus invites us to seize that second chance, change our hearts, and take the high and sometimes long road with those around us... both those we love without even trying and those we have to work to love.