“***From the Heart***” by S. Finlan. The First Church, Aug. 16, 2020

**Rom 12:4–8**

4For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, 5so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. 6We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; 7ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; 8the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

**Matthew 15:10–20**

10 Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand: 11it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” 12Then the disciples approached and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offence when they heard what you said?” 13He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. 14Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.” 15But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.” 16Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding? 17Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? 18But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. 19For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. 20These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

You’re aware, as I am, of the importance of keeping things clean right now: wearing masks, washing hands, even wiping down surfaces. But the gospel passage today is not talking about physical cleanness, but ritual cleanness. The Pharisees were very concerned with performing rituals they thought were necessary to achieving the purity that was needed before one could approach God. Jesus reacts against this notion of *ritual* purity, and asserts instead the idea of *spiritual* purity. He says, “It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles” (Matt 15:11). This is a spiritual and moral statement that refutes the established purity system, specifically the kosher system, which taught that certain foods were defiling, were ritually impure. Jesus says that the material things that pass through the body are not what matter, but evil intentions and evil deeds arising out of the heartare what are defiling. This was a shocking and radical rejection of the purity system, in favor of a moral principle of living. It reminds us of the words of radical prophets like Isaiah, who ridiculed the reliance on ritual sacrifice, saying instead “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean . . . cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isa 1:16–17).

Isaiah’s radical focus on doing good shows up in Jesus’ teaching as well. When the disciples tell Jesus that the Pharisees took offense at his words, Jesus commented not on purity but on bad religious leadership, saying “if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit” (15:14). When he is asked to explain the parables, he says that purity rules are superficial, concerning only what goes into the mouth and not what comes out of the mouth, which “proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles” (15:18). Unholy and selfish motivations lead to bad words and deeds, and *that* is the defilement about which we should be concerned. The procedural checklist of ritual purity seems not to matter at all. God knows what is in our heart, and *that* is what matters. Who knows us better than God?

It is very interesting that Jesus links this moral and anti-ritual teaching to the point about blind leadership. It seems that those whose religious concerns are mainly ritual rather than spiritual, do not make good leaders. They are concerned only with clean hands, instead of clean hearts. Jesus was focused on spiritual values, true loyalties, and clean hearts. Having clean hearts enables us to talk about what is good for the church, and that is what the excerpt from Romans covers. Paul uplifts the prophecy, the teaching, the ministry, the compassion, and the *giving* offered by different people in the church. None of these have to do with rituals and procedures.

Reflect for a moment upon what you do to create receptivity to worship. If you have a certain set of steps you follow that enable you to focus on God’s presence, that’s good. But if the outward process becomes the dominant feature, then it has lost its value as an aid to worship.

There is a downside to the *social* establishment of rituals, where rituals are used to establish social boundaries. They affirm membership and conformity in a social group. Unfortunately, that can also imply the exclusion of others from the group. The key thing about rituals is that they define a group in distinction from other groups. The insiders know what ritual is coming next, the outsiders do not. The problem is when we assume that “our” group and our rituals are holy, while other groups and other rituals are unholy.

So we should carefully consider the *meaning* behind our rituals, and be aware of our values and attitudes when we perform them. If we are dedicated simply to the religious rule book, and assume that “our” ways make us holy, then we look down our noses at those who are not part of our ritual system. We decide that they are “lost.” It is arrogant to assume that the ritual itself confers holiness. Of course, we desire conversation with God, but this does not require a rule book.

We have heard of people being “excommunicated.” The term means one is no longer allowed to communicate in the sacraments of the church, which implies a kind of exclusion from the community of the saved. Authoritarian communities make the strongest claims in support of ritual rules, inclusion, and exclusion.

Really, the exclusive rules are man-made, not God-made. But from the time of the prophets to the present, there also has been resistance to the claims of religious communities and their rituals. The prophets emphasized moral and spiritual principles over and above rituals. The ritual of sacrifice was thought by the priests to be of supreme importance in remaining in good standing before God, but Samuel said “to obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Sam 15:22). In Paul’s time, circumcision was the essential ritual for marking male membership in the covenant community, but Paul said “in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love” (Gal 5:6). And in Romans he said that “true circumcision [is not] something external and physical. . . Real circumcision is a matter of the heart” (Rom 2:28–29). It is a matter of spirituality and character, not of having passed through certain ritual hoops.

In political groups today, there are slogans and sayings that function like rituals marking one as being part of the group. Ritual has always been a marker of identity, an expression of identity politics. But political identity has very little *real* spiritual value. Historically, rituals have been part of worship, but the essence of worship is internal and spiritual, not external and ritual.

In our church, we have rituals that we take seriously, and that mark membership, such as baptism. We need to realize that there is no magic in the ritual, and that God’s invitation into the heavenly family is open to everyone. Baptism *symbolizes* our welcoming someone into the community. But God extends that welcome before we ever perform the ritual, and only God knows who will enter into that heavenly family.

The open-hearted love of God is the fundamental truth that we need to affirm and share. We need to settle in our hearts the attitude of God toward us. Jesus emphasized God as an abundantly loving Father, like the Father in the Prodigal Son parable, who went out of his way to welcome back his son, without requiring penance or apology from him. Let us release the attachment to ritual markers as being necessary before we can be acceptable to God. What matters is spiritual life, more than social identity, more than membership—even in a church.

How can you or I practice our spiritual lives in a way that affirms true purity, or circumcision of the heart? Perhaps you meditate on God at a certain time of the day, when you seek to get a glimpse of truth, or to reaffirm your faith. At such a time, ask God to implant true values more deeply within you. Ask to be spiritually pure, and to know what God’s will is for you. And trust that God is already working within you, helping the teacher in teaching, the giver in giving, and the compassionate in cheerfulness, and helping all of us to worship from the heart.

May you participate in conversation with God. Be awakened to the universe of love that awaits you. Go with God. In other words, accept life’s challenges and grow in relationship with God.