

Considering the source

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on August 30, 2015, the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost.

There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. Mark 7:15

What made people think that Jesus was such a radical for his time is that he challenged traditions that were contrary to God's will. His defining point is that the attitude of the heart is more important than the law and all other forms of human tradition. Among the 613 laws in the Torah were those about ritual cleanliness. When Jesus' disciples are criticized for ignoring the rules of ritual cleanliness he uses the occasion to teach that it is not what goes into us, but what comes out of us that defiles us. While it has been thought that the practice of washing hands was for ceremonial reasons, when the great plagues devastated the population of medieval Europe, the Jewish people were largely spared because of their practice of ritual hand washing. While this helped significantly in preventing the spread of infection, it also prompted a wave of resentment toward the Jewish people who were spared. With our increasing consciousness about protection from contagious diseases, those diseases of the spirit are no less deadly and no less contagious than those of the body.

In the letter of Saint James, we are encouraged to refrain from anger and to be quick to listen and slow to speak. We are further encouraged that when we hear God's word we must put it into action. It is one thing to know God's word and another thing to live it. James goes on to write that if we think we are religious but don't keep a civil tongue, our religion is worthless.

In our own time we think of the Pharisees as the height of hypocrisy but in Jesus' time they were keepers of the ritual codes and laws and were therefore the measure of righteousness and goodness. They carefully followed all of the sacred laws to the letter including the ritual requirement for washing hands and dishes. Jesus teaches us that observing all the external dietary laws and ritual cleanliness means nothing if it is not done out of sincere faith. What he is telling is that if we observe all the customary rituals of faith with no inner conviction, our faith is insincere and our practice of religion is false. We can memorize and quote various verses from the Bible and give eloquent testimony to our faith, but if we have no inner conviction, our faith is in vain and devoid of meaning. The upstanding member of the church who is a tyrant at home and at work sees no connection between his inner faith and outward behavior. If what is said with our lips and believed in our hearts is not practiced in our lives, it is all in vain.

Jesus teaches that the test of a true faith is that it must come from a conviction deep down inside. It is not what we see and hear that can harm us as our attitude that is formed in our own mind. Unfaithfulness, promiscuity, theft, murder, selfishness, deceit, envy, slander and excessive pride all come from within. Spiritually debilitating and contagious diseases within us are far more insidious and no less contagious than those in our environment.

Now it is important to note that while Jesus is accused of disregarding the law, his emphasis is on putting deeper meaning into the observance of the law. To be sincere in practicing what we believe, we must say what we mean and mean what we say. Explanations for bad behavior are no excuse. Neither is being a victim of abusive behavior a reason for being abusive to others.

There is always help available for those with addictive behaviors. It is a matter of wanting to be healed and seeking the necessary help to make that possible. Programs for helping people to recover from traumatic experiences and compulsive behaviors are most effective. They involve participation in mutually supportive groups made up of those with similar experiences. Many of these support groups meet in churches and it has been noted that there is as much genuine faith going on in those weekday meetings as there is in church on Sunday. In order for these groups to be effective, the participants have to be completely honest with themselves and what is going on in their life. Once they manage to turn their life around they rely on each other for mutual support. It is never easy when confronted with the necessity of making behavioral changes. The key to being responsible for our selves is the willingness to seek help. If you are anything like I am, we pride ourselves on being self-sufficient and we have to remember that self-sufficiency sometimes means knowing when and how to ask for help.

One of the major issues of the early church was a heresy known as Pelagianism after a English monk named Pelagius. He claimed that we are saved from sin through intensive self-discipline. This is another way of saying that we have to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, assuming that everyone has bootstraps with which to pull them selves up. The truth is that we can't save ourselves from sin. It is only by the grace of God that are saved from anything. We all need the help and support of those who believe in us. Whether or not we admit it, we also need the higher power of God working deep down inside to put things into perspective.

A major cause of depression is anger over past hurts. Recovery begins with the healing of those memories of hurt and anger. To let go of them is to be released from the imprisonment of depression. It is only when we are able to forgive ourselves that we can forgive others and make amends with those who have offended us as well as with those whom we have offended.

Life is a continual process of making use of our spiritual, emotional and spiritual resources. None of us will ever reach perfection. What is more important is the realization that we are forgiven. We are all a work in progress and we will never be complete until we are reconciled before God.

In his early years, Benjamin Franklin worked as a printer. He became a prolific writer and publisher and even wrote his own epitaph in which he said that he was like a worn out old book with its pages torn out. He believed that his work would not be lost and that he would appear once more in a new and more elegant edition, revised and corrected by the Author.