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Matthew 15:10-20
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The Way of the Heart

Five years ago a dear friend of mine died in a horrible accident. He was changing a tire by the side of the road late one night when a car roared out of the darkness striking and killing him. The vehicle that night was a party on wheels. It was going too fast. It was full of loud music and empty beer bottles. After it hit Stephen the vehicle paused briefly, long enough to change drivers, and then it fled on into the night, leaving my friend to die by the side of the road. It was, it still is, awful.

Stephen was a faithful Catholic, as are his parents and siblings, so at the funeral mass a few days later prayers were said, prayers asking for a day of peace to come, prayers asking for the courage to forgive those who had caused the tragedy, not because Stephen's family was ready to forgive, but because they were Christians who had been formed in the story of the faith, shaped by the words of the Catholic mass, because they hoped one day to be able to forgive. They said forgiving words because for their entire lives they had been part of a Christian community and had been formed to be forgiving people. In the midst of their worst nightmare this was not something they chose to do, it was something they did because that is who they are, because their lives, their hearts had been shaped by the story of Christ and his church above all.

I want to talk some today about the heart, our own hearts, and God's heart, and how we become people who reflect the heart of God.

In Matthew's gospel Jesus and the Pharisees are sparring about what appears to be practices of ritual cleansing. The Pharisees are pushing the traditional laws of cleanliness before eating as a way of preparing to encounter the holiness of God's creation and the life-sustaining gift of food. They would fit in well in our hyper-sanitized time, though the Pharisees' concern was that unclean hands would taint the food, and tainted food would taint the body. Unclean food, or failing to observe the laws of purity, would lead to an unclean life, a lack of holiness, and for Israel holiness was the most important thing. Israel was to be set apart to be above all a holy people, a sign to all the nations of God's faithfulness. Jesus too wants his disciples to be holy, but he says in this passage that it is not what goes into the body that forms holiness, but what comes out of the body that is the measure of holy life, a sanctified life. So Jesus says forget the hand-sanitizer, forget the neat freaks, block out your mother's voice telling you to wash up before dinner. "Dig in," says the Lord. It's not unclean hands that defile the body, it's an unclean heart. It's not what goes into the mouth that should concern us, it's what dwells in the depths of our being that we should be wary of. What comes out of the mouth originates in the heart – this, Jesus says, is the heart of the matter.

Jesus was a good Jew, and for Israel the heart was not simply an organ pumping blood through the body. The heart was the physical, spiritual, emotional, and intellectual center of one's life. There was no disconnected way of thinking about body, mind, and soul, the heart held all of it together in one unified whole. For Jesus and the rest of the children of Israel, you were your heart, and your heart was you. Today when we talk

about the heart our conversations often veer into empty piety and sappy sentimentality. When we talk about giving our heart to something it frequently means heart in the romantic sense, or we refer to those with great heart as those whose emotions run close to the surface. For Jesus and the Pharisees the heart is not about sentimentality, it does not only represent our romantic interests, it is not only the locus of our emotions, or the focal point of our dreams and aspirations, rather the heart is the core of who we are, all of us, our character, our imagination, our emotions, our romance, our ambitions, our hopes, the very best parts of ourselves are rooted in the heart and the very worst parts of ourselves also dwell in the darkness of the heart. Jesus is saying that what comes out of the mouth originates in the heart, and thus what we say, the words we choose, how we express ourselves, is a reflection of who we really are. And thus our hearts need to become holy if we are to be holy.

Sanctification is the big word that Christians use for holiness. Sanctification is the process of becoming holy, of becoming more Christ-like. Sanctification is what happens to us when we seek to follow in the way of Jesus, when we strive to do what he would do, love the people he loves, care for the things he cares about, and use words, speak about the things he spoke about, about healing and compassion, about justice and peace, about his father in heaven, about the kingdom in our midst, about those who no one else will speak about. Allowing our hearts to be slowly remade by the work of the Holy Spirit into the heart of Christ is about developing good habits and practices of Christian living and speaking, it's about learning to confess our sins and offer forgiveness, it's about singing hymns of praise in order that we might live a more praising life, it's about saying the creed together, not because we believe every word, but because we want to believe every word. It's about reading scripture and hearing good words about God. In this sense each of us is like a massive jigsaw puzzle constantly being put together or taken apart, each little piece some new or deepened practice of faith. These formational patterns, these habits and practices feed on one another, each a preparation for the one to come.

I know all of you go to bed very early on Saturday night to be at your best for worship on Sunday morning, so I'm sure none of you were watching the Olympics last night when Michael Phelps won his eighth gold medal, well let me tell you, it was fabulous, you really missed out. Perhaps some of you stayed up to watch Phelps swim on Friday night. As you know Phelps won his seventh gold medal by winning the 100 meter Butterfly, out-touching his closest opponent by one one-hundredth of a second in a race that only moments earlier looked as if he had no chance to win. At the end of the race he took an unusual final half stroke, and that half stroke was the one one-hundredth of a second difference. Asked after the swim why he took the surprising half-stroke at the end, Phelps responded, "I have no idea; I didn't think about it; I just did it." After logging thousands of hours in the pool, through repetition and practice, of doing the same techniques correctly over and over again, through the experience of countless races throughout his life, the reflexes had sunk into his very being. He didn't decide. He just did it, and that was the one-one hundredth of a second difference between setting an Olympic record that may never be broken and tying a record set by someone else.

For those of us who have been baptized in the waters of the Christian life this is what sanctification means. We practice the way of Christ until it becomes who we are, until it sinks into our hearts and comes out reflexively in beautiful ways, so we don't

have to think about it, we just do it. In the depths of the most painful days of their lives, my friend Stephen's parents offered public prayers of forgiveness for those who had taken their son's life. They didn't think through it first. They just did it, because that is who they are. It was by no means easy. In fact it was horribly painful, the whole experience a nightmare of agony, but it was no less the faithful thing to do. In this sense sanctification is a gift of the Spirit. It means not having to make a choice. It means relying on the resources of our faith to say faithful things.

In JRR Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings" the hobbits are on a quest to destroy the ring which is a terrible force of evil in the world. They run into a deep wood and suddenly find themselves surrounded by old trees, wise old talking trees. The trees are called Ents and the language they use is called Entish. Treebeard, the leader of the Ents, describes his language like this: "Entish is a lovely language, but it takes a long time to say anything in it, because we do not say anything in it, unless it is worth taking a very long time to say." Sanctification, being shaped ever more deeply into the image of Christ, does not happen all at once. It takes a very long time. The language we use, the words we speak come from a heart in process, a heart being formed into the image of Jesus. The words that come from a sanctified heart are words of kindness, and generosity, words of good humor and hope, words of beauty and truth, and there is only one way to learn to say such words, and that is to practice saying kind things, forgiving things, encouraging things, hopeful things, beautiful things; words that come from the truest parts of ourselves. The way we respond, what we say in a given moment, is so often reflexive, a mirror into our hearts.

I wonder if you can remember a time when you said something you regretted. If your experience is like mine, that list is longer than one would like. Maybe it was a harsh or hurtful word to a family member. Maybe it was an email you sent to a friend or colleague and as soon as you hit the send button you wanted to take it back. Maybe you were confronted with bad news and your words in response were not the ones you would have preferred to use. Maybe you were cut off in traffic and your verbal response to the other driver was, shall we say, less than Christian. We can all think of times we'd like to take back our words.

Now think of a time when you said words that were right and good, or someone said something to you in a moment that meant everything. Maybe it was at the bedside of a loved one who was dying and you knew you couldn't fix it or take away the pain or make it all better and you simply said, "I love you so much." Or maybe in the midst of a dark hour a friend called and said, "I'm so sorry. I'm thinking of you. I'm praying for you." And the tone of voice expressed as much as the words themselves. Or maybe a friend or loved one knocked on the door one evening and said, "Can we talk," and that was the beginning of a conversation that changed the course of your life.

What we say matters. Our words matter. Jesus says it is not what goes into the body that is significant, but what comes out of the mouth. Jesus asks us to allow the truth of who we are to come from the depths of our hearts, and for our hearts to beat to the rhythm of God's heart. Everything in our hearts should look like the words we say for this is the way it is with God. There is nothing in God's heart that does not look like Jesus.

Our words matter because in the depths of God's heart there is a word. The words that we say come from our hearts in the same way that Jesus Christ, the living

word of God, comes from the very heart of God. In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God, and in the beginning God spoke the word and all things came into being. In that spoken word God created the earth and the stars, the sun, and the moon, and with spoken words God created humanity in the divine image, and humanity flourished and fell. And then when all else failed, God chose to become the very word that he spoke, a living and breathing word that flowed from the heart of the eternal Trinity, a word that walked, and healed, and told of good news, a word that lived, died and rose again on the third day, ascended to the right hand of the Father and continues to speak into our hearts through the presence of the Holy Spirit. And when there was nothing else to say, that word, Jesus Christ, spoke words of blessing, saying this is my body, this is my blood.

And so in a few moments we will come in faith to feast on the word that is bread and wine, the word who is Jesus Christ the fullness of God's heart, the first and last word of all creation. May this grace sanctify our hearts, and give us faithful words to say.

Amen.