

9.1.2024 Pentecost 15

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9; Psalm 15; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

“Be doers of the word”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Most of you know that I am a pastor’s son who grew up on the northside of Chicago. What you may not know is that I graduated from a Jesuit high school – yes, a Lutheran pastor’s son who attended a Jesuit school! The school’s motto, “Men and women for others,” was made known in Jesuit schools throughout the world by Father Pedro Aruppe, who was the Superior General of the Jesuits from 1965-1983.

Fr. Aruppe and I share a common history as missionaries in Japan. He was a young Jesuit serving in Hiroshima on August 6th, 1945, when the atomic bomb fell on that city. He survived and used the skills he had gained in medical school in Madrid to care for the sick in a city that had been shattered by that bombing. From 1965, when Fr. Aruppe was elected Superior General of the Jesuits, he worked tirelessly to proclaim that as Christ has loved us, so we are to love others. As Christians we are to commit ourselves to lives of justice and compassion for the voiceless and the powerless of the world. This is the theology I lived with daily responding to hungry and homeless people at the parsonage door with food from the church’s emergency food pantry.

Fr. Aruppe’s words, “Men and women for others,” are written very deeply inside of me; they are the core of the gospel message that we are to live for others as Christ lives for us. As Lutherans, often express this with the words “faith active in love” (Galatians 5:6). To be “a doer of the word” means our faith should be active in love for others. Living with faith active in love, we become “men and women for others.”

In today’s gospel, the Pharisees and scribes complained to Jesus that his disciples did not wash their hands before eating. Their complaint against Jesus had nothing to do a modern understanding of washing and hygiene. Rather, their complaint was based upon a ritual tradition that was a later added human tradition meant to keep people ritually pure.

Yet for Jesus what was at issue is that simply following the rules about washing one’s hands does not automatically lead to a cleansing of the human heart. This is why Jesus, noting their hypocrisy, quoted Isaiah (29:13), “*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 hit their question head-on, telling them you can't substitute clean hands for a clean heart. Jesus was accusing them of paying "lip service" to God – of worshipping God with their lips, because when it came to acting for others with justice, mercy, compassion, and forgiveness, their hearts were far from God.

This matter of the human heart has continued down to today. A life of worship before God must also be lived out among and for God's people. We are to be, as Fr. Aruppe said, "men and women for others." God's word and the sacraments are meant to cleanse our hearts, moving us to ethical and compassionate action for others in this world.

Jesus' use of Isaiah is aimed squarely at religious people – like us – because we too can honor God with our lips, while our hearts remain far from God. In worship we hear God's word, for example, "*Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well*" (Mt. 6:33). Do we also seek God's kingdom daily, not only on Sunday morning, but also during the rest of the week, or are we busy building our own kingdoms for our own advancement and profit in this world?

In worship we hear the word, for example, "*God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them*" (Gen. 1:26-27). However, in our hearts do we think we are better than others, separating others because of their ethnicity, gender, identity, nationality, or social class? In our hearts, do we see God's image in our neighbor; in our lives, do we act for Christ in our neighbor?

Jesus answered the Pharisees squarely, saying, "*You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition,*" because throughout history people have continued to substitute their own family, cultural, and national traditions in place of a repentance of the heart that leads to servanthood for Christ and neighbor. What was at issue for Jesus are the human traditions that pull us away from acting upon God's love in our lives.

Everything begins in the heart. The human heart is the heart of the matter. Today's reading from James reminds us to "*welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.*" Everything begins in the heart because it is where God's word dwells so we might live for Christ and for our neighbor. James reminds us of the reason God's word is implanted in us: "*Be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.*" Hearing the word is meant to move our hearts with love and compassion for those in need. Hearing the word is meant to transform our hearts to do God's love in this world.

Who is someone who implanted God's word in you? Who has spoken and modeled Christ to you? A verse that was dear to my father has stayed with me from my youth: "*Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God*" (Romans 15:7). My father lived a life of profound welcome for others. He modeled Christ's welcome for each and all of us with justice, compassion, and forgiveness so that others might also act with justice, compassion, and forgiveness. Who implanted God's word in you, that you might hear and do God's word?

On Sunday, when we kneel for forgiveness, Christ welcomes us so that with forgiven hearts, we might also forgive others. In the Eucharist, when we receive the bread of life and the cup of forgiveness, we are cleansed and renewed for a purpose, to live holy lives of service for others.

Christ calls us, not to lip-service, but to be men and women for others – to be doers of the word. Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you.

Welcome the one who is different, the stranger, the poor, sick, and in prison, for Jesus Christ was all these things for you, so that you might see Christ in your neighbor.

Everything begins in the heart. May your faith be active in love.

Allow Christ to dwell again in your heart, so that over your lifetime you might do the work he has entrusted to you. Amen.