

Researching and preparing for this morning's sermon, I was caught by Jesus' argument of what "defiles" a person, which may still be a concern for some, but I believe, more than what defiles/ what concerns us is what "**Defines**" a person, what that person believes and lives their life for.

When I went to Seminary in the early 1980s, the professors described that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John each support one another by telling the same basic story of Salvation coming through the Messiah, his Baptism, Communion, death and resurrection. Each use the life of Jesus as "a Gospel," Good News of Salvation from God. We learned the history behind each Gospel, and the differences between the Gospels.

One preacher had this marvelous sermon about the Gospels. The Preacher described that The Gospel of Mark was original and unique. Mark took the circumstance of his day, the Roman destruction of the City of Jerusalem, the Empire's destruction of Judaism's 2nd Temple, as being spiritually demonstrated in the life of Jesus. The preacher ended this section of the sermon with an Altar Call: "What we need in this church is more Marks!" The preacher then turned to Matthew's uniting Jewish tradition with Christianity, such that every word Jesus spoke in the Gospel of Matthew came from the Hebrew Bible our Old Testament. He ended this section by Calling out; "What we need in this church is more Matthews!" He then turned to Luke, describing the Lawyer/Doctor who tried to appeal to the Non-Jewish/ Gentile society, with a social gospel concern for the poor and oppressed. Ending that section with the Call to the Congregation: "What we need in this church is more Lukes!" Finally, the preacher began describing the spiritual Revelation of the Gospel of John. How John believed and trusted in more than reason and understanding, actually believing in miracles and revelation! The preacher was prepared to deliver the final line of the sermon, by crying out: "What we need in this church is more Johns!" But actually, here is Green Valley our predecessors have provided multiple Rest Rooms in every hallway!

20 years after going to Seminary the first time I returned for Doctoral work, and the professors had a new and different twist. They asked, and I ask this morning "What is the Gospel of Valley Presbyterian Church?" I believe this is one of the most vital questions a church can consider. In a Nation which claims belief in God; Where even on our currency we proclaim "In God We Trust;" Where we have our Nation's flag in the House of God; where the majority of our Nation's holidays are Christian holy days, is there a difference in being a Christian and being an American?

So let me make this specific, instead of describing this as a Stephen Ministry Church, or an outstanding Music program, or The Patio Sale: IF you were, or better, WHEN you do describe this community of faith to others, how do you define the core faith of who we are and what we believe:

"God created the World and God called it GOOD!"

"I look to the High Hills, from whence my help comes, my help comes from the LORD," OR

"God so loved the world, God gave us God's only begotten Son" with an emphasis on Incarnation?

Or Is the Gospel of Valley Presbyterian Church where so many travel for 6 months of the year, that Christ sent his disciples out into the world as Apostles that you have the power to Pray, Teach and Heal others?"

Is the Gospel of this Church about Forgiveness? Or Redemption? Loss or being Found?

While on vacation, I worshipped on-line and listened intently as Pastor Diane defined churches in Tucson as: Southside is committed to Activism; St. Mark's is committed to the Arts and Creativity; St. Andrews is devoted to a love of Jesus in their care for the homeless. There is diversity among us, but what I am asking is what about our faith in God, defines us? Unique from the rest of our culture, from other congregations, including other Presbyterian congregations? Is the core of our belief involved in our seeking Redemption? in God's Resurrection that we are never separate from God? Are we the faithful remnant? After 40 days/40 nights of rain, this monsoon season, do we identify with Noah? The Desert or The Promised Land?

At this point in writing the sermon, one of the Patio Sale Truckers stopped in, telling me they had emptied a house for a woman this week, who was leaving because for the last year and a half she has been alone, no one to share a meal with or talk with, so she was leaving to be with family. I asked if he invited her to Worship, but he said she already decided to give up. And the Trucker and I agreed, that is just wrong!

In this morning's reading, Jesus is arguing with the Pharisees about what is needed, what is right and wrong. Jesus arguing with Pharisees is like the Harlem Globetrotters playing the Senators or Nationals. We know going into this, the Globetrotters are going to win, the Pharisees are only there as a foil for Jesus. I am so thankful that we have gotten to the point with COVID that the FDA has granted full approval for the Pfizer vaccination and a 3rd dose, so we are not distracted by equating this Hand Washing to that; because ritual hand washing is only a symptom of the Pharisees' argument, just like keeping Kosher and Segregation and Power, which ALL together as isolation and purity are the point of this passage.

To appreciate this passage we need to go back about 500 years before Jesus. Among all the Empires of the Earth, the People of Israel knew themselves to be The Chosen People of God, who throughout 40 years in the wilderness, all the generations of the Judges, the Monarchy of Kings Saul, David and Solomon, God defended them! They believed: they possessed the 10 Commandments, the Ark of the Covenant, the Temple at Jerusalem which itself was the House of God, so God would protect them. But in the year 587 BC Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians, and when they returned to the land 70 years later, Judaism itself was divided into denominations.

Many stopped believing in God and became secular! The Book of Isaiah describes some believed their problem was God is concerned with our caring for other people, and Israel had been isolationist. The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah argue just the opposite. That, their faith was in a Holy God of purity, requiring that they strictly follow rituals of cleansing and purity and separation from all that is unholy. The word "Pharisee" means separate ones. When I was in Upstate New York, I came to realize the War between the States was not so simple as Union versus Confederate, because each of these were divided between those who prayed to God, those praying about the issues, those who were willing to violate the Law for what they believed, and those who believed in killing others for what they feared the other believed.

For 500 years, from the destruction of the first Temple, through the reconstruction and the life of Jesus, Judaism had been led by Lawyers, Librarians and Royalty called Pharisees, Scribes and Saducees. These believed so strictly in holiness and purity that they did not associate with others, they made Lepers outsiders. If you recall the Musical "Fiddler on the Roof," the point of everything was "TRADITION, TRADITION!" When along comes Jesus, who was thoroughly schooled as being a Pharisee, but when he sat down to read at the synagogue at Nazareth, he selected that passage from Isaiah about "Preaching good news to the poor, release to the captives, restoring sight to the blind, setting free those who suffer."

The problem with concerns of ritual, isolation, purity and holiness over and against naming what defiles us, is that we are driven by fear. While the Pharisees' concern for ritual to preserve tradition, to preserve what is sacred to us, to God, began out of sincere belief; their fears had grown so rigid that everything in their society was connected like a house of cards. Violating even the most minor offense, like not washing your hands before a meal, meant that the world might collapse, our most sacred hopes and dreams might be violated; individually we manifest a need to protect our lives, our Nation, our world, from others. Fear distorts reality so that the important concerns of life are missed. Fear tricked the Pharisees into believing that if they did the proper external rituals, they would be guaranteed of being inwardly pure.

It occurs to me that much of Christian Faith, much of what has been missing in our world, comes down to a single thing: EMPATHY, our care for one another.

So what is The GOSPEL OF VALLEY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH? Of all the many events and stories of the Bible, what describes what we believe about God?