

Contamination
Matthew 15:10-20
August 20, 2017 – Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Jesus said, “It’s not what goes into the mouth that contaminates a person in God’s sight. It’s what comes out of the mouth that contaminates the person.” Friends, I need to tell you, I am greatly saddened but what I’ll call the deterioration of language in our society. This deterioration happens on two level – grammar and content. On the grammatical level, there is generally a haphazard usage of language today with little attention to proper form. I personally have had people comment that I know the difference between “who” and “whom.” As a college professor who required students to write academic papers, I can tell you it was rare that I received a paper that paid attention to things like agreement in number and person, proper case usage, and one of my personal pet peeves: sentences should not end with a preposition. Now, I do not believe that God cares if we use proper grammar; but this deterioration robs language of its richness and its full communicative ability.

Still, for the purposes of this sermon and our call as children of God, the second level of deterioration – content – is of far greater concern. I am deeply distressed by a contemporary cultural acceptance of profanity. In post-modern secular society it seems there is little restriction on what is considered appropriate language. I find it distressing that I cannot go to the movies or read a novel – well written, quality work, without listening to or reading an extreme level of profanity. Indeed, I’m told that sometimes writers will intentionally increase the level of profanity in a movie to get an adult rating. It seems adult ratings sell better. What’s that all about?

Friends, I tell you: Profanity contaminates a person. When I was in college, I had a summer job working in a soda pop bottling plant. It was a real blessing. It paid double the minimum wage at the time, and it made paying my college tuition bills possible. But the workers in that plant used an inordinate amount of horrible profanity. I refused to take part in that. I have never in my life used such language. Still, as a result of my constant exposure to it, I began to think in those terms. Someone would cut me off in traffic, and the first thought that came to my head was a string of profanity; and it took a long time to rid myself of this contamination. Indeed, I believe the contamination of our language is contagious.

Today, when I’m among friends or relatives, and they use such language, I ask them to please not use such language in my presence. I’m somewhat amused and somewhat disheartened, when someone cusses in my presence; and then, realizing that I’m a minister, apologizes to me. To that I ask, why my clergy status

should make a difference. If it's not appropriate to cuss in my presence, it's not appropriate to cuss in anyone's presence, for we are all children of God.

Indeed, the use of language – cussing and major degradation of people – is not just a feature of everyday street language. It's becoming more and more prevalent in what should be formal, respectful, speech. It seems daily that I now hear of major “put downs” on the part of politicians, be they from the President of the United States, his staff, U.S. Senators and Congressmen, and the list goes on; and this is true on both sides of the aisle. Recently, since the announcement of Senator John McCain's brain cancer, the media has been replaying an excerpt from his 2008 presidential campaign. In that excerpt, a McCain supporter took what I'll call a pot shot at Barack Obama. McCain interrupted the speaker saying, “No madam, Barack Obama is a Christian, and a good family man. We just happen to have some fundamental differences on the way our country should be run, but he's a good man.” Would that more of our leaders would take a page from John McCain's play book.

But then came the events of the last week. Some of you may know that I generally start working a a sermon two or three weeks before I preach it. Three weeks ago I had no idea what this week would bring; but this week as brought more hateful speech, more violence, more bigotry, more racism than I had seen in this country since the civil rights movement of the 1960's. I had hoped, indeed I had prayed that such hatred was behind us; but this week brought that sad, awful truth to the fore. The hatred, indeed the contamination continues.

I spent the day, yesterday at a training session at the East Ohio United Methodist Area Center. I was asked to be part of the Bishop's Critical Response Team – a group of people that would be prepared to go into a congregation when a crisis happen, to help with the healing; and it was my privilege to say “Yes,” I will be a part of such a team. For our opening devotion yesterday, our bishop shared these words, for the twelfth chapter of Paul's Letter to the Romans (and in the interest of time, I'm only reading selected verses):

“Love should be shown without pretending. Hate evil, and hold on to what is good. Love each other like the members of your family. . . Bless people who harass you – bless and don't curse them. Be happy with those who are happy, and cry with those who are crying. Consider everyone as equal, and don't think that you're better than anyone else. Instead associate with people who have no status. . . If possible, to the best of your ability, live at peace with all people. . . Don't be defeated by evil, but defeat evil with good.” (Romans 12:21 *Selected Verses*)

“Defeat evil with good.” Indeed these are words to live by in our troubled times.

Perhaps one of the saddest things about hateful language, is that it contaminates the speaker as much or more than the hearer. Indeed, with the deterioration of language, the blind are leading the blind; and both risk falling into the pit. Jesus said, “What comes out of the mouth comes from the heart; and that’s what contaminates a person. Out of the heart comes evil thoughts; murder, adultery, sexual sins, thefts, false testimonies, and insults.” I wonder if people hurling profanity and insults and falsehoods ever think about such language as a reflection of their hearts. I’ll go one step further. Even if what is being said is true, if it’s said in a hurtful, vindictive manner, it’s a reflection of the heart and a contamination of the soul. How often we all harbor guilt, resentment, various animosities. We carry them in our hearts; and they contaminate our souls.

As I have said so many times before, you and I and every person on this planet was created in the image of God. You and I and every person on this planet has a spark of the divine in their inner most being; and the spark of the divine calls for a clean heart, a loving heart, a caring heart. That spark of the divine calls each of us to reach out, to speak out, to radiate that love to all people whether we agree with them or not, indeed whether we like them or not. We are called to radiate the love of God to all people, even if they don’t return the favor. We are called to “defeat evil with good.”

Psalms 51 says it all in a simple prayer: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.” Indeed the evil that comes from our hearts, the evil that comes out of our mouths, contaminates our souls. But the reverse is also true, the goodness, the joy, the love that comes from our hearts, the love that is expressed in our words and our actions, cleanses our souls. It creates a clean heart within us.

Some of you know that I have a certain fondness for the *Desiderata*, a devotional poem writing in 1927. It became a popular song in the early seventies, and I’m old enough to remember that. I think it contains a lot of wisdom. It advises: “Avoid loud and aggressive persons: they are vexations to the spirit.” How do we end the contamination? First, we make sure that we do not take part in the process. We listen to what comes out of our mouths, and recognize it as a reflection of our hearts. We seek always and everywhere to radiate the peace, the joy, and the love of God to everyone we meet – our relatives and long-time friends and those that we meet for the first time. And, finally, we avoid the contamination from the mouths of others, from the media – film, video, and print; and from those with whom we associate.

And friends, I truly believe, that through radiating God’s love, that love reflects back on us; and we personally experience that love and joy. And I also believe that every time we share God’s love with another person, the world becomes a little better place in which to live.

It's time to end the contamination. It's time to share the Good News.

Let us pray. . .

Holy Lord,

Let us end the contamination.

May we end the contamination in our country, in our society and in our world.

May we truly work to defeat evil with good.

Created in each of us a clean heart;

and renew a right spirit within us,

that we may follow in the path of peace, and joy, and love.

Amen.

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