

## Children's sermon

Back in 2009, there was a struggle in our denomination. It was a gut-wrenching fight among colleagues and congregations who were framing their particular views as "returning to the truth" which meant, of course, that whoever thought slightly differently was automatically on the side of falsehood, and by default, on the side of sin.

I remember a meeting in which two colleagues went off on the rest of us saying incredibly angry and hateful things. The group struggled to keep a sense of balance, but so much was said in anger we spontaneously stood up and the meeting just sort dissolved into a nasty mess. On our way to our cars a usually calm, collected colleague lamented, "I am so tired of people who feel called to be mean for Jesus."

I've never forgotten that moment. And while I have been blessed in this place to be able to have those difficult conversations, I am reminded of it because it perfectly captures a certain type of person of faith; one that many of us have had to deal with.....and one that some of us may be.

This means that as I talk, I need for all of us to look into the mirror of who we are.....in here.....

In today's Gospel reading we find the quintessential "Mean for God" guys... the Pharisees, challenging Jesus on, of all things, hand-washing. ..as in "why don't your disciples wash their hands before eating? Instead of dealing with the hand-washing question, Jesus calls them out for their misplaced priorities...and sums up the problem he has with them in a pithy and damning: ***this people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.***

Wow! That cuts deep. The meaning of "Pharisees" or "hypocrite" or "mean for God" guys is wrapped up in that single phrase. And they are still with us. You've seen them, I am sure.

They'll pay for a children's wing, as long as none of "those kids" attend.

They pray for missionaries overseas, but have no desire to connect with the poor and homeless at their doorstep.

They complain about the service going twenty minutes long, but refuse to talk with the guest with the tattoos sitting alone in their pew.

But, we could all make a list of "them" couldn't we? The self-righteous who measure their godliness by the number of rules they follow, rather than by the amount of love and grace they offer freely to anyone. Could their hearts be far from God? But why? Hardened by hurt, or fear, or distrust. And worst of all, they don't see it. They believe they are just "following the word" as they continue to be Mean for Jesus.

I could stop here, and say we learned our lesson: don't be like that. Don't be mean for Jesus, you really don't have to. Don't get all wrapped up in the rules, and traditions, and the way you think it all should be.

Okay? Good. Then there's James. James is like the Popular Mechanics of all the Bibles books. It is practical. It is relevant. It really is important.

And what does James say? ***Be doers of the word, and not only hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like....wait for***

***it.....those who look at themselves in the mirror, for they look, and going away immediately forget what they were like.***

So, imagine your mirror. What was the core of the sin of the Pharisees? What is the core of the sin of those mean for Jesus? Their obedience to their religion's rites and rules blinds them to their shared humanity with others, and gives them license to hurt the others in the name of whom? Mean for God. Mean for Jesus.

I am religious in the right way...and you....are not. Therefore I am good, and you are....not. And the difference between us is more important than whatever humanity we share... And since my religion is Good, I am free to put you in your place....mean for Jesus....until you believe like.....me.

There is a timeliness in these two readings today. For the past week we have been grieving the death of a very special man, John McCain. What strikes me about his life, and witness is that Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees, and James' encouragement to be doers of the word came in the epicenter of the Mean for God offices. "I'm right and you are wrong" is so 2<sup>nd</sup> grade that it is surreal to hear the news anymore. But yesterday's witness to John McCain's life was beautiful and frightening. The beauty is seen in the stories of his selfless serving, bipartisanship, and willingness to work a compromise for the good of all people. The frightening part is the spirit that is Mean for America scoffs every bipartisan effort, and uses 2<sup>nd</sup> grade antics to force self-serving points and jeopardize international relationships. ***This people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.*** I believe it may be some time before we discover someone willing to stand with a prophet's clarion voice, and issue a Godly call for justice and peace.

There is a time and a place for you to stand up for your understanding of the faith. There is a time and place to point out actions that are out of line with God's character. There is a time and place to lay out our differences and wrestle with the implications.

But....yep, another one....if in doing so you move from "this is how I see it" to "this is how God agrees with me" you have moved toward that Mean for Jesus label. And, worse, if you do it and don't realize it, or don't catch yourself, they you are living into James passage: you look into the word and never see yourself.

Like my friend, I too grow weary of people being Mean for Jesus. And lately I am on guard against becoming like that without realizing it. It's getting harder and harder the farther we go into this chapter of our history where mean-ness is the commodity of communicating, and compassion is viewed as utter foolishness. If that be the case, let us become fools for Christ.... And refuse to enter the fray of being Mean to be Right. We are called to show love foolishly caring for the humanity we share with every other child of God....even, especially, the mean ones. If you do, you'll mess with their heads.....Jesus was foolish for the outcast, the poor, the nobodies, and for.....every last one of us. Foolishly in love....with you, with us...for Christ's sake. Amen.

Rev. Alan Field  
New Spirit Lutheran Church ELCA

Sept. 2, 2018  
Tucson, AZ