

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, MI
Filtering by Faith
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Song of Songs 2:8-14; Mark 7:14-23

Quick Greek 101 refresher before I read the second verse or else this is going to sound like a really strange verse for me to choose for today.

By the time Jesus began his ministry, language had become a cultural phenomenon and was regarded as a valuable art form. This is the age of Philosophers, poets, and storytellers. The masters of language were the ones who could take a gigantic concept and express that meaning in the fewest words. They would do this in different ways like combining multiple words to make a new more meaningful word or weaving together intricate metaphors. Language had become a dance between the speaker and the listener. The listener's part was to bring their own experiences to infer deeper meaning than words could ever express.

I think Jesus can easily be put into the category of a master of language. The sheer amount of meaning Jesus is able to pack into a parable, a short story, sometimes no more than a sentence long, is proof enough that Jesus knows how to use words well. A simple way for Jesus to pack more meaning into less language is to allow the listener to do their part of the dance and infer through logic that Jesus is talking about more than what he says. For example, to allow the opposite to also be true, the unspoken vice versa. Jesus does exactly this with The Beatitudes. Jesus says "blessed are the merciful" and when we hear that, our logic also infers that the unmerciful are not blessed. That opposite expression isn't explicitly said but by specifically linking blessings to being merciful Jesus allows those listening to infer the opposite is just as true. The Gospel of Luke confirms that Jesus meant the beatitudes to be interpreted both ways. Luke includes the opposite statements which reinforces that when Jesus taught the beatitudes, whether he said the vice versa statements or not, he meant for people to conclude the opposite, unspoken statement, was also true. We see this come up a lot in the way Jesus teaches. He likes to say the outlandish thing to get our attention but what he really means for us to learn is well, vice versa.

Now we are ready to hear this verse from Mark. (Read from Bible)

Okay, so you can see why I needed to set that verse up a little. These probably aren't the parting words you expected me to pick today. BUT...as we just reviewed, we can take Jesus' shocking word choices and infer in an equal and opposite direction to get a lesson that is a little more appropriate for the day.

Jesus says that it is what comes out of a person that defiles them. He says this because the religious elite has just called out the disciples for eating with "defiled" hands. They didn't wash their hands before they ate. SO picture it, Jesus is sitting with a crowd of people. People who are sick because the water they have access to is polluted. People whose spouses abandoned them and the only work anyone will pay them to do is sex work. People whose hope and joy have been shaved away by an oppressive form of government and defiled hands is what the religious leaders focus on as the problem!?! It's no wonder Jesus chooses to give this teaching with such inflammatory language. They are oblivious to the human reality right in front of them, gentle words are not going to get the point across.

Jesus uses their word “defile” right back at them. There is nothing outside a person that can defile them, the things that come out of us are what defile us. WOW. To say this statement to this crowd: “What is outside you cannot devalue you.” To say this to people who ingest polluted water every day, whose work is universally considered profane, to say that your life circumstances do not in any way make you less worthy of love, and that God highly values you to people whose outer experience is filthy with injustice is a powerful statement for Jesus to make. There is nothing outside a person that can defile them.

And here is where that Greek lesson really amps this teaching up. If the things outside us do not factor into our worthiness, then if you do have clean water, if you do have a job people admire, if the system supports your hope and joy, those things also do not factor into our worthiness. Life circumstances do not make us any less, or any more valuable to God.

Then Jesus says the things that come out of us are what defile. He gives the disciples a colorful list of examples to show that, yes, there are terrible things in this world but they are not the result of what goes into our bodies; the traumas of this world are created in the hearts of humans. What do we DO when we see polluted water? What does our heart dream up in that situation? What comes out of us is what we need to be concerned about.

And if what comes out of us can defile us then it must be true that what comes out of us can also “de-defile” us.....or maybe the opposite of defile is just “file”? The English language is confusing. I looked up antonyms of “defile” and here are some options for us: “honor” “upgrade” “protect” “sanctify” “cleanse” What comes out of us is what brings an upgrade, it is what brings us honor, what protects us.

If what comes out of us can defile us, then what comes out of us can also be cleansing.

Recently I took a class taught by Rev. Susan Beaumont to delve deeper into her book, “How to lead when you don’t know where you are going.” The pandemic seemed like a good time to study the topic. For one of the classes, Susan led a kind of breath prayer, but it was completely different from any breath prayer I had ever been taught. A breath prayer is when you repeat a bible verse or affirmation or selected words and you connect the words to your breath in and breath out. The most popular one is: “breathe in God’s light” and “breathe out the shadows.” All the breath prayers I have ever been introduced to follow the same format. Breathing in the good stuff and breathing out the bad stuff.

Well, this time Susan guided us to breathe in stress, grief, and pain and breathe out hope, peace, and comfort. Exactly opposite to what I expected. The practice is called Tonglen (tong-lin) which is Tibetan for “sending and receiving.”

After a few breaths, it occurred to me that switching what I was focused on as I took in a breath and what I let out, essentially made me a filter. We were filtering the negative and producing the positive. It was so empowering. To focus my breath, my source of life, on taking in that which I saw as wrong in the world and being the filter through which only good could re-enter the world was an incredible feeling. Seeing myself in the role of a filter brought all my attention to the fact that I have a role to play for real. To walk through the muck of this world and do what I can to clean it up.

It is exactly what Jesus is saying to the crowd and the disciples. A person cannot be defiled by the muck around them even if it enters into them. Now if that person is producing more muck, we have a problem. Our role, our place in creation is to actively upgrade this world. Jesus confirms that we have the capacity to live among the muck in such a way that we produce something altogether different, something honorable, clean, and upgraded.

A few of you have said to me “We have been so lucky to have you here,” but what I hope you understand is that I am a product of the things that came from you. This church is not affirming because I am, I am committing the next chapter of my ministry to inclusion because you have lived out the value of inclusion in a way I didn't realize was possible until I was here. When I came to First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham I didn't see myself as an entrepreneurial leader. I became that because of the time I spent with you. The way you balance a love of tradition and passion for innovation is not something churches do well and yet...here you are. From you came the encouragement for me to experiment and fail and dream huge dreams. I am so lucky to have you...here.

Now look, I get why searching for new staff and leaders is distressing. I have heard the stories and church lore that make it hard to hold on to hope. But this church did not become what it is today because of the leaders and staff who have been in the building. This is Everybody's Church because of what comes out of your hearts. The care you pour out is why this church has such a great impact on places like Alcott. The regard you share is why this church has become a brave space for so many to authentically be themselves. The love that comes out of you is why people walk into this building and immediately feel like they are home.

If you find yourself worrying about what Everybody's Church will become, know that it will become that which comes from within you. Everybody's Church will always be what you nurture in your hearts and how you show up for one another.

You have absolutely upgraded me during the time I have been here, and it has been my honor to be your Pastor. Thank you.