

Sermon for Pentecost 15 – September 2nd, 2018
Pastor Russell Britton

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

1 So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. 2 You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God with which I am charging you.

6 You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!" 7 For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? 8 And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today? 9 But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children—

James 1:17-27

17 Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. 18 In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. 19 You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20 for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. 21 Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. 22 But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. 23 For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; 24 for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 25 But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing. 26 If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23 – *On Sunday read full Mark 7: 1-23 text*

1 Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, 2 they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. 3 (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; 4 and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) 5 So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" 6 He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; 7 in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' 8 You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

14 Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: 15 there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."

21 For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, 22 adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. 23 All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

Ivory Soap and Slippery Minds

Interstate Highway Standards suggest that the lanes be a minimum of 12 feet with an outer shoulder of at least 10 feet and an inner shoulder of at least 4 feet.¹ Why would I look that up? Because riding in a 26 foot UHaul you *really* don't want to fall off either side. Returning it to Port Townsend particularly precarious. There is a concern to 'stay within the lines.'

Really this comes down to the *purity* culture of that day and age. And the Pharisees made a full time job of keeping people within the lines of purity. To be fair to the Pharisees they weren't trying to *earn* anything by their adherence² – they're trying to *respond* appropriately to gift God GAVE. But it's Labor Day weekend and we are to take a break from our labor. Let's turn from labor to reflections.

What came to mind for me was IVORY soap. Most of my experience with Ivory soap was in Boy Scouting learning knife safety with it and carving curious little trinkets and curios. Now cleanliness does come to mind where we hear James encourage us to remain unstained. But particularly what I remember is that Ivory professes to be 99 44/100ths *pure*. That's really pure, that's so pure as to be within a statistical deviation of perfect – ooh there I did it. I invoked the word that captivates the hearts of many in our effusive superlative world. Perfect. Right up there with elite, superior, luxury, best and other dubiously ascribed words.

I guess Jesus is taking a shot at pretenses and *appearances* and that really strikes me as timely because during the long road trip this past week with my Dad and I in a 26 foot UHaul I reread the Stephen Covey classic *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. And I'm pleased to say I will now be incontrovertibly highly effective! (ha ha) But seriously the role of accurately looking at whether you embody the principles you profess is a measure of deep integrity. Covey's son, also a Stephen – different middle initials – then writes *The Speed of Trust*, developing on his father's precepts that – in the end – character matters far more than appearances. Wait, which is what Jesus is saying in the Gospel. So *when* – not if – we mess up the question is whether we fess up? Do we ascribe fault is circumstances where our own complicity is visible for all to see? That's hardly sustainable. So where is the Gospel of God's love and care in this seemingly heavily conviction and law within this passage. That Jesus sees us *for who we are*, not who we pretend to be when we are not being that – **AND LOVES US STILL**.³ We need to remember that – and **be** God's light to each other – we need to remind others of their beloved status. You don't have to *convince* – ultimately you couldn't - you get to remind, to invite people to see God's care.

Lots of great music listened to in that cab of the UHaul – while one of the songs was the one I sang earlier [*Nothing More* by The Alternate Routes], another that seems to resonate is *Planting Seeds* by a fellow named Daniel Nahmod. It is fantastic, offered that you might find something worth reflecting on as you hear these lyrics:

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interstate_Highway_standards

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3758

³ Alanis Morissette 'Still' <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/alanismorissette/still.html>

‘*Planting Seeds*’ words and music by Daniel Nahmod from album *Water*

I’ve been planting seeds on the ground
Watering them with my sweat and tears
Scattering them all around
I guess that’s what I’m supposed to do with my
years

Funny thing is I may know
What I’ve planted but never what will show
It always seems to be a perfect mystery

Chorus

Whatever grows will grow,
Whatever dies will die,
Whatever works will work,
Whatever flies will fly,
Whatever fails will fail,
What’s meant to soar will soar
I am planting seeds, nothing more.

Sometimes I still like to pretend
I know what the harvest will be
But I always find out in the end
It was never really up to me

Funny thing I when I just
Do my work and simply trust
Always seems that life is looking out for me

Chorus

Bridge

I am only one of billions of seeds
When all is said and done
I just do what’s mine to do and let it be
Chorus x2

The seeds others plant in my life so often seem to be words. Here goes ‘word pastor’ again. I’ve been thinking lately about *assimilation, ascription, and appropriation*. Just in a quick summary let’s offer that ascription is what we project as understanding on another; appropriation is what is *taken*; assimilation is taking what you have presently and melding it, in some way, with newly presented insights or convictions. But just like something lathered up with Pharasaical soap things get slippery. A challenging Covey insight is we often judge ourselves on our intentions and judge others on their behaviors. And Emerson spoke this descriptive resounding truth, “What you do speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say.” For really, pharisee, scribe, family, or friend – we are how we treat each other and nothing more.

No matter what soap brand you are inclined toward, or the distance you’re comfortable with your road’s shoulders, may you offer your heart, soul, mind and strength to God *as it is*, maybe the pretending won’t go away right away but God will step with you in every direction of integrity. This will astonish some and delight others. Blessings on you and yours the remainder of this good Labor Day weekend. Be the person your dog *thinks* you are and who God *knows* you are. May God indeed bless the labors of our hands and hearts as we seek to be who God has made us to be and knows we can become.

Amen.