

*Fr. John Warfel – 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost – 09.01.2024*

*Jesus, why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders,  
But eat with defiled hands?*

If there is one single group with whom Our Lord has no patience  
It is with hypocrites.

*Hear again what Jesus says to the scribes and Pharisees:  
Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,  
This people honors me with their lips,  
But their hearts are far from me*

*In vain do they worship me,  
Teaching human precepts as doctrine  
You abandon the commandments of God and hold to human tradition*

In the Hebrew Scriptures, there aren't just ten commandments  
There are actually 613 commandments  
248 thou shalt and 365 thou shalt not.  
Ten of them are familiar enough;  
The other 603 are sprinkled throughout the first five books of the Old Testament

This, of course, became a great burden for the faithful followers-  
of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.  
Even for 24 hours,  
It is impossible for any human being to obey all 613 commandments perfectly

Right behavior before God became legalistic, complicated and fixed  
The letter of the Law superseded the spirit of the Law  
And oh, how the Pharisees loved to trap Jesus  
Why do your disciples eat with defiled hands, Jesus? *Gotcha*

Jesus answers swiftly and shrewdly:  
*There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile  
But the things that come out are what defile  
For it is from within, from the human heart that evil intentions come*

Ah, the human heart  
How we romanticize it with heart shaped boxes of chocolate on Valentines Day  
In antiquity the heart was considered to be the center of all emotions, as it is today  
But, unlike today, the heart was also considered to be the center of all wisdom,  
The heart, not the brain, grounded all decision-making

Jesus takes it a step further  
Besides wisdom and emotion, the heart is the center of all things spiritual as well  
From the heart come faith, joy, love, courage  
But here's the rub:  
Evil intentions also come from the heart,  
Envy, slander, wickedness, pride and so on

The heart can be as pure as a mountain stream  
Or as foul as a sewer  
Jesus tells us-  
External things, things outside a person, do little to change the purity of the heart.  
Washing hands before eating is a meaningless gesture if the heart is not pure

There is a dark side, a **shadow side** to the heart:  
This is the side that insists on always being right.  
Right about religion,  
Right about politics,  
Right about righteousness itself

All evil stems from the unequivocal assertion that **I am right**  
And if you don't agree with me – **you are wrong**,  
So you can't be my friend.  
You don't belong here.  
I don't like your kind  
I hate you. I will destroy you.  
See how rapidly it all escalates?

The degree of escalation depends largely on our willingness and ability-  
to consider the *possibility* that we might be wrong  
How many of us find it easy or natural to consider the possibility of being wrong?  
Not many, because most of us, at one time or another-  
Have created an idol out of being right, I know have.

Nowhere is this idolatry more insidious-  
Than when we presume to know the Mind of God;  
And then use that as justification for being right.

Does this mean that no position can be defended as just or right?  
Does this reduce us to moral relativism?  
No. Absolutely not

When Martin Luther King preached that we should be judged-  
Not by the color of our skin,  
But by the content of our character – he could not have been more right

He knew he was right  
But he also knew that, ultimately,  
being faithful to God is more important than being right.  
Even when it turns out that we are right,  
We do not have a green light to hate those we think are wrong.

Being right, even when it turns out that we are right, is not the prize  
Being right, even when it turns out that we are right, is not our purpose  
Our purpose, our ultimate goal is **complete union with God,**  
**Complete fusion with the Creator**  
That cannot happen unless we respect the dignity of every of every human being  
Even when the other is wrong; especially when the other is *dead* wrong.

Ok, so presumably none of us is called to be the next Martin Luther King  
None of us is called to be the next Mahatma Gandhi  
Presumably none of us has been graced with their passion or spiritual gifts  
But that doesn't let us off the hook  
We are still responsible for checking and tempering our own hearts.

All the grudges, all the bullying, all the festering anger  
All past confrontations we replay in the tapes of our own minds,  
All the zingers all the gotchas we wish we had said  
All the plans we had to get even  
All these things come from withi

These are the things that defile a person  
It is here, within ourselves, within our own hearts, that we must confront evil.  
This confrontation requires gut-wrenching vulnerability and brutal honesty:  
So much is at stake  
Our idols, our smoldering resentments, our disdain for certain groups of people  
Our defensive walls and barriers...

We'd rather not look at them, we'd rather not be reminded of them  
Yes, we know that all these things wreak havoc on our souls  
But they're just too painful to look at.

As destructive as they may be, we are oddly comfortable with them  
They are part of who we are.

As the old saying goes,  
The devil we know is better than the devil we don't.

Who would we be if all our anger, judgment and resentment-  
were suddenly lifted from us?  
Who then would we be? That's a very good question.

The point is, God **does not, cannot, will not** leave us  
The God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known,  
and from whom no secrets are hid is **right here with us.**  
Right here, fervently waiting to heal our brokenness

Mindful of God's ongoing presence and unconditional love  
We gather up the shadow sides of our hearts  
And we spread them all out on a table before God

Whether we're examining our hearts at the end of the day  
Or embarking on a fearless life-long moral inventory  
We invite God into our thoughts  
(Why not, after all, God is already there)  
*Bidden or not bidden, God is present*

Start by becoming mindful of God's presence and God's unconditional love  
Then ask God to cleanse and heal your heart,  
Trust God to hold all the pieces, even the shadow pieces  
Trust God's power to renew human hearts

Then, together with God, turn over each broken piece and ask  
Is it right or is it faithful?  
That's the best way I know to confront evil,  
Perhaps it's the only way.