



Becoming Doers of the Word

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sean Lanigan
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost~September 2, 2018*

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

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. 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. 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!" For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today? 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.

Psalms 15

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| 1 | O God, who may dwell in your tabernacle? *
who may abide upon your holy hill? | 4 | In their sight the wicked is rejected, *
but they honor those who fear God. |
| 2 | Whoever leads a blameless life and does what is right, *
who speaks the truthfully from the heart. | 5 | They have sworn to do no wrong *
and do not take back their word. |
| 3 | There is no guile upon their tongues;
they does no evil to their friends; *
they does not heap contempt upon their neighbors. | 6 | They do not give their money in hope of gain, *
nor do they take a bribe against the innocent. |
| | | 7 | Whoever does these things *
shall never be overthrown. |

James 1:17-27

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. 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. You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. 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. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 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. If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 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

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; 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.) 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?" 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; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: 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: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

“This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”

“Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.”

“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.”

These verses from our readings today all seem to have something in common, at least to my ear.

And that commonality, as I hear it, is our quite enormous human capacity for self-deception. Our remarkable tendency toward living divided lives. Our ability to forget too easily who we really are and what really matters to us.

I remember several moments very clearly from my childhood. Moments I observed adults behaving out-of-character—adults behaving in surprising and disappointing and even unfair ways, in ways at odd with how I usually experienced them. And I remember this dissonance troubling me deeply.

Trying to make sense of these situations, I remember vowing to my parents that I was going to be the same person in all circumstances, all the time. I desperately wanted to be consistent. I wanted all of my actions to mirror my principles. People would always know where they stood with me and what I was all about. I wanted to find others with a desire to live this way, too... to find people committed to a high level of integrity and authenticity.

At some point in my development, I had the bright idea that I could find more of this aspirational living in the church than I would anywhere else. You see, I've always imagined the church as a place for people who are seeking more out of life: something deeper, something truer, something really real. And that is *sometimes* the case.

But as I've grown older, I've realized that it can be difficult to maintain the high level of consistency that I craved as a child. We all tend to show different sides of ourselves to different people. Tend to behave differently depending on the situation or context. And much of this is natural and inevitable and relatively harmless. We all do it, some of the time. We all end up wearing masks.

But sometimes, it seems, people can end up becoming more and more internally divided. Can begin deceiving themselves, their loved ones, their communities. Can end up professing principles they don't practice. Can end up becoming dangerously hypocritical. And it can happen to institutions, too.

I've been thinking about hypocrisy a lot lately, especially about the hypocrisy of the church. I've read, with horror and anger and deep sadness, about the continuing revelations of sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church, the church in which I was raised. I've read about what, by all appearances, appear to be sinister cover-up efforts by the Church. And as a result of all of this, I've felt more suspect than usual when wearing my clerical collar out in public. I know that huge numbers of people now strongly associate organized religion with immorality and depravity and abuse. And it makes me ashamed and embarrassed.

Crisis has hit the Buddhist community again recently, too, with significant revelations of sexual abuse recently coming out of the Shambhala community concerning their top leadership.

And the Episcopal Church is not immune either, with revelations in recent years about significant histories of abuse at several elite Episcopal boarding schools, including St. Paul's School in New Hampshire and St. George's School in Rhode Island.

People seem to be one thing—trustworthy religious leaders—but are entirely something else, underneath. But why, and how? It's something I've struggled with for a long time. The exact place where I thought I could find moral high ground is so often anything but. Years ago, at the beginning of Divinity School, I felt a calling to become a Catholic priest, and particularly, a Jesuit. Jesuits got to go to school for a long time, which excited me. And part of the 12 years of training prior to priestly ordination included opportunities to serve in other countries, as well as in a range of place throughout the United States. It felt like an adventurous, intellectual way to live out my faith.

I went through several phases of the discernment process with the Jesuits. I was committed to being honest about my sexual orientation, even if that meant that I would ultimately not be able to move forward. I was going through this process just a few years after the news media in Boston had revealed the grave extent of the Catholic Church's sexual abuse problem. It was a tense time to be exploring priesthood.

I remember being on one discernment retreat and daring to ask a question about how we would be taught to

practice celibacy in a healthy way. I was met initially with silence, and then some sort of hurried, perfunctory non-answer. A wave of shame followed for asking what seemed to have been an inappropriate and unwelcome question. But in my heart, I knew it was appropriate. I knew it was absolutely vital. I knew that questions like these had to be asked. Tragically, the sexual abuse of thousands of children had still not made these men capable of talking openly about sexuality.

With much sadness, and after several further experiences of deep dissonance, I left the discernment process and simultaneously left the Catholic Church. I was filled with sorrow for the broken Body of Christ, and also filled with sorrow for a sense of vocation that no longer had a home. Sorrow for the loss of a church I loved.

In the aftermath of these experiences of hypocrisy in the church, of a church that professed care for the most vulnerable, while in many cases doing nothing to protect them—I redoubled my commitment to consistency, to acting in accord with my values as often as possible. To avoiding hypocrisy at all costs.

But it's a really hard thing to do, I've discovered in the years since then. Jesus calls us to a remarkable life. To an enormous vision for the flourishing of all creation. To radical generosity toward the poor and tremendous care for the vulnerable. To the release of our endless quest for status and prestige. And to live in this way, we must sometimes act against our own desires...must sometimes behave in profoundly self-sacrificial ways. To live in this difficult way, then, most of us will need accountability and support. It's far too hard to do counter-cultural things without the encouragement of others. On our own, it's so much easier to keep up appearances: to cultivate a veneer of holiness and charity, while doing whatever we please, when no one's looking.

More than most people, we Christians need strong structures of accountability. Because we have made such big and glorious promises. And because we want to keep these promises –*well*, most of the time, at least.

In the Baptismal Covenant, for instance, one of the promises we make, or others make on our behalf, is a promise: “to respect the dignity of every human being.”

It's an amazing thing to promise. But also a nearly impossible thing. Something none of us can do all of the time. **Every Human Being.** No one left out.

In my Christian journey, I have never been asked by a fellow believer: how are you doing with your promise “to respect the dignity of every human being?” We almost never think to check in on each other's spiritual health. It seems far too invasive, too impolite.

Each person's journey is his or her own business. But it's not, really, is it? We ARE each others' business, as Christians. Fundamentally linked. We are the Body of Christ. But Communing together each Sunday at the table doesn't seem to be enough to teach us how to live as that Body.

Every Sunday, when we come to the Confession of Sin in our liturgy, I tend wonder a bit about what's going on in your minds. What have you struggled with this week? What are the deep concerns of your minds and hearts? Are the ten seconds of silence nearly enough to recollect all that you need to share with God? Do the words of our communal confession even begin to cover it all?

I wonder, not in an invasive, nosy way, but in a way that arises from my desire to be part of an accountable community, to be part of a community that cares how I'm “respecting the dignity of every human being.” A community in which I'm allowed and invited to care about how you're doing it, too.

But that's not how we've set ourselves up. We have made the Confession of Sin a completely private, interior process. As if our sins are something too embarrassing to speak aloud. When, in reality, they are an inevitable part of the human journey, and they desperately need the light of day in order to lose their hold on us.

At my church in California, we had a special practice each year on Ash Wednesday. Early in our liturgy, notecards were passed around, and people were invited to write down as many sins as they could think of. Sins against self, others, God, and creation. People put their cards into a big basket, and then we shuffled and redistributed them. Each person got a stack, and we then read them aloud as a litany, no names attached.

It was powerful to hear your own sins read by someone else. Powerful to see people nodding in identification and understanding and compassion upon hearing your sins. Powerful to hear your own story reflected in someone else's sins, the realization that we're truly all in this together. It was an exercise that de-privatized and de-stigmatized sin. And it turned out to be one of the most important things we did all year. A strong symbol of our commitment to honesty and integrity in our life together as a community.

In confessing our sins together, each of us developed a mental map of the collective struggles of our community. We became more sensitized to the ways that people hurt, and to the range of ways that they deal with their pain.

And this simple activity—speaking our sins aloud—helped us learn to better care for one another, to be more curious about the burdens others might be carrying, and to be more willing to reveal our own burdens. We knew that we were a deeply imperfect group of people, and embracing that imperfection became a key to our liberation.

Now, I don't have any note cards here today. But I'm still curious. Still curious about how you're walking the way of love and justice, and about what stands in your way. We need each other. More than we know. So that we may truly "be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves."

Amen.