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### Pure in Heart

7Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, 2they 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; 4and 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.) 5So 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?" 6He 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;  
7in vain do they worship me,  
teaching human precepts as doctrines.'

8You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

14Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: 15there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." 21For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, 22adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. 23All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person." Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

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Jesus said: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile. For it is from within, from the human heart, that defile a person.

Let's try to make sense of what this might mean for us today.

You've probably heard this parable many times: When a priest saw a man wounded alongside the road – a man had been beaten by robbers and left for dead – he did not come to the man's rescue. Instead, the priest crossed to the other side of the road and continued on his way. It was only until a Samaritan came along – a very good Samaritan as it turned out – that the wounded man gets any help. What made priest seem so indifferent to human suffering? The same reason why a woman, she had been bleeding for years, created such a stir when she pushed her way through a crowd to touch the robe of Jesus. She had heard of his power to heal, and she believed that to simply touch Jesus she would be made well. And it did. Her bleeding stopped for the first time in twelve years. But still the healed woman spoke to Jesus afterward with fear and trembling, not joy. She knew what a huge risk she took coming into human contact, in such a public way, in the physical state she was in.

From the sermons we may have heard, we know how lepers were shunned and treated in Biblical times and down through the centuries – how they were kept apart from the general population in a colonies and communities of their own.

Why? The priest, the woman and the lepers. It comes down to purity.

Today's gospel reading touches on the issue on the why. Granted, purity is something we might conclude has little to do with us today.

I want to offer a different another way to think about it. Think about how we decide or feel what is right and wrong, who is in and who is out. Our sense of who and what is pure comes into play.

In some forms, the sense of purity can contrast what we believe is right and wrong and who is in and who is out. The reading also brings up the question of tradition vs. change: how many of the old ways and customs we should keep, and which ones should be discarded, amended and changed to keep up with the times. How do we achieve the right balance between old and new? That is certainly something in the church we think about. How we hold old and new in tension.

I think of the practice that some brides still hold to on wedding day: "Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue." 'Old' for something from the past. My daughter wore her mother's wedding dress two years ago this weekend and walked down this very aisle – the same dress her grandmother wore. 'New' for the hope for tomorrow. 'Borrowed' would bring happiness to the one who last possessed it, and 'blue' was a symbol of purity and love.

Pharisees and the scribes asked Jesus: "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders?" Why was purity so important in Jesus' day?

It came down to identity. For so many centuries, the people of Israel kept certain rituals around food and rituals, so they and others knew the community to which they belonged. It was understood and guarded as something positive, not obsessive and trivial. And by keeping these customs they believed they drew closer to God. They knew who they were and whose they were.

Back to the Good Samaritan story, in such a world it was the priest's duty to maintain the purity of the people – to keep them close to God. Everyone in society needed to know the rules: what made them clean or unclean. A woman after childbirth was unclean. So too was anyone who came into contact with a dead body. Clear lines.

Nicole and I had actually had a discussion about ritual purity in the church kitchen the other week – yes, I know it was a slow workday. In our church kitchen across the way we have had a team of our parishioners who have taken real ownership and pride of our hospitality and the upkeep of kitchen. And with shared use of so many groups and people, it is not easy to keep it straightened and organized. We are in the middle of a project of

washing many of our older dishes through the washing machine. Nicole pointed out to me with a smile the other day when she noticed that that we have labeled one cabinet of dishes 'clean' and the other 'unclean.' She commented: "I didn't know Christ Church was keeping up with Biblical dietary customs. Impressive!"

In the thinking of the day what good was a priest, the very person in charge of keeping standards of purity for the community, if he was down in the ditch with a dead man. The priest in the parable chose the community over the individual that day and that led to Jesus' teachable moment about who are our neighbors. To care for the person was to care for the community.

In today's reading, Jesus explains. "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: 15there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." Biologically speaking, what goes in, passes through and comes out. I'll spare you the details, but you have get the point. The bigger concern is what rises up and out of a person deep from within – from the human heart. The list is a serious one: theft, murder, envy, slander, and pride, among others. Those are the actions that truly threaten the livelihood and the health of all.

Let's be clear: Jesus did not make a clear and clean break with Jewish tradition around dietary rules. His point was more that those rules and traditions should not mask or distort the real threat to the common good and the building up of the Kingdom of God he spoke so much about.

So, what are you and I to make of this? We do not live in ancient Israel. We live in multi-cultural America yet still questions of identity and purity can challenge us. After all: who is "one of us" or "one of them"? Who is accepted as "normal" and who is shunned and shamed and demonized because they are misunderstood or feared? At our weakest or perhaps most honest moments we can all succumb to intellectual, political or cultural purity – sizing ourselves and others up and assigning some people to this camp or that.

For example, those of us worshipping in an Episcopal church on a Sunday morning are considered mainline Christians. There are assumptions and generalizations made about how we think about a whole range of issues. So too for those who would call themselves Traditional, Bible believing, Fundamentalist Christians. Pollsters today speak of the Evangelical vote in America politics: they can often forecast how we will vote based on what kind of church we attend. Rural counties are colored red on election maps: urban centers blue.

Many ask what does it mean to be a patriotic American today? To love one's country.

Questions of racial identity are always before us.

I'm sure you've been asked to check a box or two on forms and applications over the years.

What race did you check? American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; Black or African American; Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; White. In terms of ethnicity: Hispanic or Not Hispanic.

Today, one does not have to choose only one category because some people do not feel they are only one identity. My grandson may grow to check white for his father and Hispanic for his Cuba mother and her grandparents.

It wasn't always that way in our country. You may have heard about the One-Drop rule. A byproduct of slavery and Jim Crow segregation, a single drop of black or African blood made a person black. It did not matter if a parent was white, or three of your four grandparents were white. One drop.

I mention this so that we can be on guard how forms of purity and litmus tests can too easily return from a past we may have thought was done and forgotten.

There is nothing outside a person that can defile. It is from within.

Be on guard for what come from within when we forget or lose sight of why we were brought into being and our true identity in God's eyes. We are made to love and be loved. To grow to understand that the God we worship and want to experience more deeply is within us already, living and moving through us.