

**August 20, 2017/20th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Matthew 15:10-28;**

**Rev. Joel M. Krueger**

***"What Comes Out of the Mouth - The Right of Free Speech"***

In our gospel passage today, Jesus makes it pretty clear, that what we say, says a lot about who we are. For, as he says, ". . . *what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart . . .*" He is having another one of those running arguments with his favorite sparring partners, the Pharisees and scribes. This time it is the issue of why his disciples don't follow the traditional ritual of hand washing before they eat. The concern is that if you don't wash your hands, the food you eat becomes unclean, and therefore you become defiled.

As with the arguments about keeping the Sabbath and other religious traditions, Jesus seeks to address the deeper issue, raising the question of *tradition vs. morality*. Does God care more about the keeping of your traditions and rituals, over what is in your hearts? And he quotes the prophet Isaiah, saying, "*This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of humans.*" God doesn't want lip service, God wants heart action!

And he says, if you're really concerned about what defiles, or makes a person bad, makes them sinful, or hurts them spiritually, don't look at how they are eating, or what they are putting *in* their mouths. Look at what is coming *out* of their mouths! Because that will tell you what is in their hearts! And it is what is in the heart that tells you where they stand with God. "*For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person.*"

Of course, the opposite is also true. For out of the heart can also come loving thoughts, kindness, compassion, faithfulness, purity, self-giving, honesty, encouragement. These are the things that draw a person closer to God. And what comes out of the mouth can also express blessing.

Last week in the city of Charlottesville, Virginia, a rally to protest the removal of a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee, was held by various white supremacist groups, including neo-Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan, and other alt-right groups. The rally was intended to not only protest the removal of the statue, but to openly display the existence and power of these groups, to unite them together, as a show of force to be reckoned with. Many of their members came dressed in casual clothing, while others came in some of their traditional costuming, the KKK robes, the Nazi flags, and some came wearing helmets and riot gear with weapons suggesting their preparedness for violence.

They clashed with others who came to counter, not just their protest of the removal of the statue, but more so the things for which they stand for. There were certainly some who came only to cause mischief and mayhem between the various groups and the police. But the vast majority of these others came to protest the values of racism and anti-

Semitism, misogyny, and pure hatred, expressed by these right-wing groups. They were religious people of Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and other faith traditions, as well as those from no faith traditions at all. There were black and white and Hispanic and Asian and Native American, and many other ethnic backgrounds.

And all of them, all of them together were speaking out their messages, shouting at the top of their lungs what they wanted to say. Some of it violent and filled with hatred. Some of it calling for calm and civility. Some shouted words of intimidation. Some whispered words of prayer. In all of it, those words were showing the hearts of our people.

In our country we believe in the freedom of all people to be able to speak their minds, to express their opinions openly, no matter if they are kind or cruel, good or evil. We believe in the right to free speech. The First Amendment of the Bill of Rights of the American Constitution says, "*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.*"

And in 1969 case, *Brandenburg v. Ohio*, the Supreme Court held that inflammatory speech--and even speech advocating violence by members of the Ku Klux Klan--is protected under the First Amendment, unless the speech "*is directed to inciting or producing imminent lawless action and is likely to incite or produce such action.*"

Some would argue that the speech of white supremacists in Charlottesville may have led to or incited the actions of James Alex Fields, who drove his car into a crowd of counter protesters there, killing Heather Heyer and injuring others. Should such speech be protected?

And then yesterday, some 40,000 gathered to counter protest a "free speech" rally that many thought was to attract white supremacists, but which quickly fizzled, muffling the voices of hate and division, due to the strong, overwhelming presence of the counter protesters.

So, what are we, who are Christians, who follow the way of Christ, supposed to be doing in these times? I think it is clear that we need to be speaking out and addressing the issues of racism and countering the ideas held by white supremacists and any others that seek to divide, to oppress, to harm, to label, to stereotype, or in any way demean any people.

For many of us, it is hard to believe, that after all we have been through, from the beginnings of the Abolitionist movement and the Amistad court case, to the Civil War and Jim Crow legislation, to the fight for labor rights, women's suffrage, the civil rights

era of the 1960s, and most recently to the fight for LGBTQ rights, that we are still having to deal with these things today!

But what that reminds us of, is that the fight, the cause, for equality and justice must continue! We can never stop insisting in the basic human rights and freedoms of all people. We must keep on learning and growing and pushing for the advancement and inclusion of all people in our social structures. We need to have more open dialogue with each other, listening to one another. We need to be true to the hearts that God has put inside us. We need to find ways to speak the love and the compassion of God that is in us.

An interesting thing happens in our gospel reading today. After Jesus talks about the importance of what comes out of the mouth, he himself is moved to change what he is saying. Based on his understanding that his ministry must first be to the Jewish people, as proclaimed in the Hebrew scriptures, Jesus tells the Canaanite woman that he cannot help her and her demon possessed daughter. He even refers to her and her people, with a derogatory name, calling them "dogs." But she is persistent, and speaks from her heart, from the heart of a loving, dedicated mother, with a *faith* that he cannot deny. In so doing, her *heart* speaks to his *heart*, and he is persuaded. Her daughter is healed, and Jesus' understanding of his own mission and ministry evolves and is expanded. And we get to see him as *fully human*, with ears and a heart that are open to hearing the voice and needs of another.

We must have hearts that are open to the *expansive* and *inclusive* nature of God's love. We must be persistent and committed to the long, continuing struggle to proclaim God's *all-inclusive love* for all people, the whole world over. And we must be willing to speak what is in our *hearts*, no matter what the cost. In these times of struggle and uncertainty, may God bless us and guide us, so that what comes out of our mouths, and in all that we do, we proclaim the *love of God*, through the presence and power of the Spirit of Christ. Amen.