

Sept. 1, 2024

Pr. Steve

Texts: Deuteronomy 4: 1-2, 6-9; James 1: 17-27; Psalm 15; Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

In the name of God, Abba/Imma, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

How many of you are pure—pure of heart? [Hands go up] That's not good.

How many of you are good—good at sinning? [No hands go up]

(It's time for another congregation—okay?)

*'We like things to be good, and orderly, and organized. You know, if there's a kind of purity about things, doesn't that make life easier? We like to clean our homes; we'd like a clean and ordinary schedule to live by. If things could just be organized and flow—wouldn't that be nice? Ducks in order. That's what we say. That's our mantra—ducks in order. That's all I'm asking.'*

But when we apply this to people, it becomes dangerous. It is weaponizing Purity. *'Now, none of us claim to be pure, but we do assume that we really have pure standards, don't we? Ordinary standards—the way life should be lived, don't we? That's why we're working so hard at it. And when other people don't fit into the way things should be, they're unworthy. It's pretty simple—they made themselves 'Outsiders.'*

This is what tyrants appeal to throughout history. *'We're just trying to organize things, put everything in order. It's so simple. Who can object to it?' That's why the Nazis kept fastidious lists of all the categories. 'It's so clear. Do you fit or not? Not so bad. 'Comply or die'. Pretty simple, don't you think? Pretty simple. You don't even need to say it out loud. 'Comply or die.'*

Any questions? I just organized it for you. Take a look at that list again of the ostracized, the sinners, on the back of your bulletin insert there—scan that list. *[\*\*see p.5\*\*]* And one of the most refreshing things as you look at that list is that you're not on it— isn't that great? Well, maybe there's one or two categories, but it's not that bad, and we just love to compare [ourselves] with other people and we go, *'I guess I'm not that bad—it feels pretty good.'*

And then we're only a hair's breadth away from becoming 'righteous'. Yeah, yeah. Now at Peace, nobody would ever claim to be righteous out loud. I know that—I know that. *'But we can still say it to ourselves on the inside, can't we?'*

I have a nephew who—because I presided at the wedding of his sister to another woman—he has felt free to announce to the entire rest of the family that I am *'going to Hell'*. Now that may be true, and it's his opinion. But I am bewildered at the audacity of another human being to say, *'I know you're going to Hell.'* Wow, where does that come from?

There was a time a few years back when I thought, you know, maybe we should appoint or elect somebody at Peace to be in charge of monitoring the sins and failures of all the other members of Peace. That that would help us, you know, in the name of full disclosure, to put it out there each week: *"Here's how people have messed up"*. And then we'd all know.

Well, I thought about that further and realized, 'No, that would take three to five people on the committee because there's so much to deal with it. You know, to present that would be a lot of work. And now I've realized —*'we're all volunteer members of the committee, so we really don't need it. Yeah, you know, somebody's got to be in charge—make sure the rest of us know—yeah.'*

Jesus is unclean. He is impure. He is contaminated. He is not holy, not just by the company he kept, but because he called some of these people (the very bottom, the dregs of the barrel—tax collectors and toll collectors) to be members of his inner circle as disciples. What is he thinking? Is he ignoring the texts we heard today? Aren't they perfectly clear? *'I've brought you into the land. If you follow the customs, laws, the rules, the documents, the protocols, the Covenant, you'll be considered great among the people.'* [Deuteronomy 4] It's all there. It's laid out right in order.

This is Jesus, ignoring this. Yeah. Not because he doesn't care about it—[but] because if anything gets in the way of understanding someone else, of loving another person, of coming into relationship in a new way, he throws the obstacles out. [Mark 7: 8, 14-15] *We're here to build bridges, to love, to understand, to come into communion*—and if it's in the way, he treats it like cobwebs. No big deal.

People are offended by him. And not only that—there's what's called 'dining etiquette' in the Scriptures—in all the Gospel stories, wherever meals are mentioned, they're trying to make a huge theological point. And so, people like Zacchaeus and Levi, tax collectors, throw parties for Jesus and his friends. Who else are they inviting? Their own friends—the Mob, the ostracized, the

sinner, people like people at Peace—are invited to the party. It's a provocative display of affirmation of all the sinners. It would be like having a public dinner with the Mafia—what could go wrong?

And he is crystal clear that it's not the outside, on the exterior, in the rituals that make up who a person is—it's what comes out of our minds. *What are you people thinking?* It's what comes out of our attitudes and our mouths and our hearts that leads to action, which tells the truth of who we are.

And then, he goes deeper. We have a tendency to recoil from our own brokenness and wounds. We judge ourselves for all those things we don't like about ourselves. We judge ourselves as harshly as we judge other people—because that 'stuff' shouldn't exist. We call it an 'It.' Somehow, it's in here, and we don't like it. It infuriates us. It just shouldn't be there. And if it persists, and persists—which it usually does—it leads to **self loathing**. And that's dangerous. It's really dangerous.

Thomas Merton, the contemplative monk, has a wonderful insight into the dynamics of this. *“The Christ we find in ourselves is not identified with what we vainly seek to admire and idolize in ourselves. The Christ we find in ourselves is not identified with what we admire and idolize in ourselves. On the contrary, Christ identifies himself with what we resent in ourselves. For Christ has taken upon himself our wretchedness and our misery, our poverty, and our sins—so that we can find some peace.”* Merton—The Monastic Journey

For the sake of our peace, God meets us where we stand most in need—in the midst of our poverty and our wounds, and our brokenness. Right there. And as we mature in faith, we come to meet what we resent in ourselves. Inevitably when we realize *‘I'm not quite as good as I thought’*, and I don't want anybody else to find out, we want to deny the whole truth of who we are, because that's bad—or not good enough.

Christ won't allow that. He comes to us in that most tender, vulnerable place to share it with us, to relieve and release us into that deeper love in which we are held by God.

That's what prayer and contemplation and the Sacraments are about—teaching us to live into the paradox of our wounds—so that we can discover,

God willing, **non-condemnation**. That's what we really need down deep—non-condemnation of ourselves and others.

Our God—in astounding, infinite compassion—*loves us as we are*. That is a deep-down bedrock truth of the Gospel for which Christ gives his life. *We are loved as we are—now*. Marlene, Catherine, Karen—loved as you are. And we love this—and we hate this, “*That can't be true, can it?*” And we disciples always reject it because, “*I'm going to fix this myself! Yes, I am. This week I'm going to get around to it, and I'm going to fix myself.*”

So, we fall back into all the judgmental games because they're easier—the anger and the fear which James is talking about [James 1: 19-20]—that anger and fear, which will obliterate wisdom, and silence, and listening, and the ‘other’. We fall back into the envy and the pride and the shame of it all, because it's easier to blame—than to face our wounds.

And yet, and yet, non-condemnation is the most precious gift because the imperfections of myself and others can all become opportunities for change, and healing, and new understanding. They're not dead ends, they're doorways.

And though we will get entangled again and again in all of the blame games and the judging, now we know there's an option. That instead of crawling back into the condemnation, perhaps we can open ourselves gradually to the God who sees us and wants us to see ourselves and others through the eyes of compassion—*that we are loved already and always as we are*.

It's hard to take. It's really hard to take, and that's why Grace always appears to be a Disgrace—because *it lets the contaminated parts of ourselves in*. Because we can't figure it out, we have this meal offered again, and again, and again—this meal of Grace where we get to taste and see that everything is now pure gift, blessing, and bounty.

Welcome home. Amen.

The peace, which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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The Ostracized

1	2	3	4
<i>Kidd. iv. 14</i>	<i>Ket. vii. 10</i>	<i>b. Kidd. 82a</i>	<i>b. Sanh. 25b</i>

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1. Ass-driver	1. Dung-collector	1. Goldsmith	1. Gambler with dice
2. Camel-driver	2. Copper-smelter	2. Flax-comber	2. Usurer
3. Sailor	3. Tanner	3. Handmill cleaner	3. Pigeon-trainer
4. Carter		4. Pedlar	4. Dealer in produce of the sabbatical year
5. Herdsman		5. Weaver	5. Herdsman
6. Shopkeeper		6. Barber	6. Tax collector
7. Physician		7. Launderer	7. Publican
8. Butcher		8. Blood-letter	
		9. Bath attendant	
		10. Tanner	

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