

## ***Defiled?***

United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

August 20, 2023 – Sunday Morning Worship

4<sup>th</sup> Sermon in the Series: *Why church...*

Text: Matthew 15:10-20

This text from Matthew's Gospel is not for the faint of heart, preacher-wise. In one of the clergy groups I participate in online, a fellow preacher was in a tizzy because she usually tries to be on vacation when this particular text comes up in the Lectionary rotation. She didn't manage to do that this year and was asking to hear what others of us were planning to do with this unusual text from Matthew. I didn't post my answer because she was already getting plenty of advice from others, but her reaction to this text stuck with me. But, then again, I think it must be one of the only Gospel texts in which Jesus talks about the simple realities of the human digestive system. He says in verse 17, "do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?" Okay, then! A little graphic, Jesus, thank you very much! Who doesn't want to preach on that little gem of a verse?

Of course, that is no where near the main point of Jesus' lesson here. In order to understand why in the world Jesus would be talking about bodily functions at this particular moment, we need to look at the verses before where we started our reading for today. In those, Jesus is responding to yet another criticism masking as a question coming from the Pharisees and scribes, Temple officials all about the rules. They ask him why it is that his disciples do not wash their hands before eating as tradition requires. Jesus finds this question more than a little annoying and fires back an answer that's actually difficult for us to comprehend. He asks them why they break the commandment of honoring father and mother so easily by telling their fathers and mothers that the support which might have come to them

is now going to God, i.e., the Temple. In other words, Jesus is saying to them – “don’t talk to me about tradition when you don’t even keep the commandments as they were intended!”

At this point, Jesus turns to those following him because he does want them to understand why he is not making a big deal about the disciples washing their hands before meals. I should stop at this point to explain that what Jesus is really talking about here has nothing to do with whether or not the disciples should or should not wash before meals. Not really. We hear this story and we can’t imagine why Jesus *wouldn’t* want the disciples to wash their hands. After all, in our 21<sup>st</sup> century post-Covid world, we want some assurances that folks *are* washing their hands regularly and especially if they are sitting down to a common meal with us! But our reality is not Jesus’ reality and even though it looks like he’s flying in the face of known good hygiene practices, that’s really not what this story is all about. Not at all. It’s about what it means to be defiled.

Defiled is a harsh word, and Jesus knows it. Jesus also knows that in the minds of Pharisees and scribes, the handwashing issue is all about intentionally becoming defiled, something surely no faithful person would want. That’s why Jesus explains in verse 11, “it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” This is the key point of Jesus’ teaching here and it has nothing to do with eating food and the cleanliness of your hands when doing so. Jesus here is confronting the ancient purity laws that controlled so much of the lives of the people trying to follow the purity codes of the Torah. This is where the notion of eating with clean hands comes from. This is also where the numerous dietary restrictions come from: no pork or shellfish because they are unclean; no mixing of dairy with meat, and so on. And the purity codes don’t just deal with food and cleanliness. They deal with

everything from the kinds of fabrics which can be worn at the same time to how long a woman has to remain isolated following the birth of a child or the completion of her monthly cycle. It dictates that people who are ill with certain diseases must be isolated from their families as well and so on, and so on. The tiniest details are proscribed in the purity codes and to be a faithful person, one is expected to follow all of them all the time – which, by the way, would be virtually impossible.

So, as Jesus is talking with the people after his little interlude with the Pharisees and scribes, he is actually telling them “you don’t have to worry so much about the purity codes.” Don’t get stuck in the notion of what defiles a person, what makes a person clean or unclean. Instead, understand that what matters in your relationship with God is not whether your hands are properly clean, or you are wearing the proscribed fabrics or eating the right food. What matters, Jesus says, is what you do and how you behave as a person who loves God. He continues with the hand-washing example as he continues his explanation. He tells them that it is not whether or not your hands are clean, or whether or not you are eating food that is “pure.” No, he says what you put in your mouth does not matter. You are not defiled by what you eat or whether or not you are eating with clean hands. What is defiling is what comes out of your mouth – namely words that are hurtful, or deceitful or untrue. He acknowledges too that words are used to encourage people to commit acts that are defiling in and of themselves: murder, adultery, theft and slander. In other words, what is defiling to you as a person – what makes you impure and sinful before God is not whether your hands are clean or dirty. Nor is it whether the foods you eat are acceptable, whatever that means. No, the only thing that connects your mouth and defiling behavior is what you say. In other words, Jesus is saying unequivocally here that words

matter. Words that hurt or harm another person are where sin lies, where defilement of the person speaking them begins and ends.

Words matter.

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me.” Some of us of a certain age remember being taught this by our parents or grandparents as a response to when we were being teased or bullied on the school playground. I don’t know about you but throwing this phrase at a bully never worked too well in my experience. It never worked for a couple of reasons. First of all, in grade school bullies and teasers could care less about a pithy phrase like this. Nothing was more fun than seeing how upset they could make you with their words. Second, the phrase, pithy or not, is just plain wrong. Names called out to demean or bully or punish or isolate do hurt. A lot. They can hurt so much that decades later, we still remember them and the sting they inflicted. In third grade, I had a beautiful red raincoat with a matching hat and umbrella that my mother bought me for school. I loved it and I still remember the first day I wore it. I was so proud, until one of the kids who was always teasing me called out, “Look! It’s little Red Riding Ruthie!” I was mortified, and angry. No one called me Ruthie but my family and closest friends for one thing. And, in teasing me about this coat from my mother, I felt they were disrespecting her. I cried. And the laughing just got louder. But I wore the coat the next day. Gradually the teasing stopped but I will never forget the searing pain of the innocent sounding taunt of “Little Red Riding Ruthie.” Words matter. Words hurt, demean, damage, defile.

We know this! We do! And yet hurtful words abound in our lives each day. If you follow social media, you are all too aware of the “Karen” videos which record women behaving rudely and outrageously while being filmed. There’s also a whole vlog entitled,

“Am I the A\*\*hole?” in which people post questions about situations where they think they might have been out of line – like refusing to let their brother’s little kids come to the wedding because they are out of control little monsters. Seriously? This is how far away from civility we have fallen? Instead of Miss Manners or Emily Post, now we get our social behavior advice from an online personality willing to pass judgment on whether or not you have been an a\*\*hole? Yikes!! What comes out of the mouth is what defiles. Words matter. Yes, they do.

All this is why I was so excited when I came across a most amazing article in this past week’s *The Atlantic* magazine. It’s entitled “How America Got Mean” and it was written by David Brooks. It’s such an outstanding article that it was chosen as the “One Story to Read Today” in *The Atlantic* for August 14. I have a few copies available here that you can pick up if you’d like to read the whole article and I think you just might. The author begins by confiding that he has been pondering two questions for at least the past two years: 1) Why have Americans become so sad? And 2) Why have Americans become so mean? <sup>1</sup> He quotes some sobering statistics in reference to the first question. One he notes is that 38% of Americans ages 25-54 were not married nor living with a romantic partner in 2019. That’s up from 29% in 1990. He also notes that 25% of 40 year olds have never been married. Most scary is the statistic that fully 44% of American high school students “report ‘persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness.’” <sup>2</sup> 44% of our kids are tormented by hopelessness. No wonder suicide rates among youth are at an all time high.

In reflecting on the second question, Brooks begins by sharing a conversation he had with a friend who owns a restaurant lamenting

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/09/us-culture-moral-education-formation/674765/>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

that never a week goes by these days when he doesn't have to throw someone out of his restaurant for rude or crude behavior. That never used to happen, he said. Now, it's routine. Brooks believes this is occurring because "social trust is plummeting. ... [Instead] the words that define our age reek of menace: conspiracy, polarization, mass shootings, trauma, safe spaces."<sup>3</sup> He goes on to identify this as our society being enmeshed in what he calls "some sort of emotional, relational, and spiritual crisis ... [that] undergirds our political dysfunction and the general crisis of our democracy."<sup>4</sup> Again, Yikes!

Fortunately, Brooks does offer some hope and insight into a better way forward in the future when he observes, "We inhabit a society in which people are no longer trained in how to treat others with kindness and consideration. Our society has become one in which people feel licensed to give their selfishness free rein."<sup>5</sup> This is because, he argues, "We live in a society that's terrible at moral formation."<sup>6</sup> This moral formation comes down to three basic principles which he argues people need to be intentionally taught: 1) Helping people learn to restrain their selfishness; 2) Teaching basic social and ethical skills; and 3) helping people find a purpose in life.<sup>7</sup> The remainder of the article fleshes out the history of how moral formation has been taught in previous generations, noting that part of the moral relativism of today is the result of the obvious inequities in American society that gradually rendered the old concepts of morality

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

outmoded and outdated. These would include all the “isms” like racism, sexism, ableism, and ageism along with the horrible behavior displayed toward the poor, immigrants and the LGBTQ+ community and other marginalized groups.

In other words, as we saw the weaknesses in the old moral codes which enshrined the notion of whiteness, affluence and rigid definitions of who was entitled to what, we have managed to throw the “moral code baby” out with the bath water, so to speak. Since the old moral code was no longer widely acceptable, it became irrelevant and when that happened, we just stopped paying attention as a society to what it means to be a good person, a kind person, a person intent on making a positive difference in society. Instead, a moral relativism focused on the individual defining for themselves what is good for them regardless of how it impacts other people as the beginning and end of moral formation. In other words, there is no intentional moral formation anymore on a societal level. We have literally created a society in which rugged individualism which leads to financial success and individual prosperity is the lofty goal to which all should aspire. The other? Who’s that? Never mind. I don’t really care. I’ve got mine and I don’t care if you have anything.

Sound familiar? Dear friends, this is where our society is right now. This is the society in which we in the church are being called to minister, to be part of the solution to this moral vacuum passing for civilization. This is also the reason churches have seen dwindling membership and participation. Since the founding of our country, and long before, the church has always been understood as one of the key places where moral formation occurs. But trust in the church writ large has eroded due to so many recent church scandals, both those of sexual abuse and financial abuse and the relentless of conservative

churches to regulate everything from library books to women's autonomy or lack thereof.

But that, dear ones, is not us. We in this church are still the faithful keepers of the ever evolving Judeo-Christian tradition. We are the ones who still understand that coming to church, being a part of a church is one of the most important and foundational ways of being anchored in a world set adrift in a sea of moral relativism that says anything goes. We, dear ones, are the ones entrusted with the sacred responsibility of reminding the folks in our own families, in our own circle of friends, in our own community that the church is where we learn together the very best antidote to moral relativism run amuck. How do we do this? By remembering why we're here in the first place. We're here because God is our anchor when life goes crazy. We're here because we trust that Jesus holds us up when life beats us down. We're here because the Holy Spirit emboldens and inspires us to make a way in all this craziness we call life today when others can see no way forward.

That is especially true for our church as a congregation of the United Church of Christ, the church of the radical welcome and the unrelenting quest for justice for all people and the environment. Our work of moral formation in our tradition has never waived, even as societal conditions battered the church from without. We have survived our own scandals of every sort in the UCC but we are also the denomination that was the first to ordain a woman, the first to ordain a black man, the first to ordain a gay man. The United Church of Christ also did amazing things that get lost in the pages of history. When apartheid first reared its ugly head in South Africa post WWII, UCC ministers on the ground there saw what was happening and the ownership of black churches was transferred to white men before the government could take them and shut them down. After the fall of



apartheid in the early 1990's, those white missionaries of the United Church of Christ transferred the titles of all those churches back to the black people for whom they had been holding them in trust. Also in the 1990's – 1993 to be exact – the United Church of Christ offered a formal apology to the native peoples of Hawaii for their role in the colonialism that almost wiped out the native culture. They did this because it was the missionaries of our own New England congregational churches who traveled to Hawaii to establish churches intended to “save the heathens” native to that beautiful land. Words matter. Words can defile but they can also heal. Words hurt but they also offer hope when it is in such short supply. Words used in conversation and dialog can help to uncover a way forward, a way that seeks to reclaim our role as a primary place in society where moral formation happens.

Dear ones, we of the church – our church, this church --- are in the business of moral formation. We always have been. We have always known that our words matter. That Jesus' words matter. That living by God's word and Jesus' simple rule that we love God with all that we are and all that we have even as we love the other as much as we love ourselves is the essence of moral formation and the opposite of practices and actions which lead to defilement. We know that our words matter more now than they ever have before. Our words offer inspiration and hope, kindness and gentleness, peace and calmness. Our words of invitation to be here as part of this community are real, coming together to create our very own bulwark against the storm that is American society today. In the weeks ahead we will continue to explore what it means for our church to dare to consider new possibilities even as we treasure tradition. I hope you will join us, in person if you are able, but certainly online as we remind ourselves that words matter always. Especially God's. Amen.