

Rev. Beth J. Costlow

14th Sunday after Pentecost

James 1:17-27

August 29, 2021

Prepared for: Lutheran Church of Our Saviour, Greenville SC

- “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me.”
 - How many of you heard this growing up?
 - How many of you, like me, will call BS on it as an adult?
 - There aren’t many of us who grow up without some scars from the words others have used.
 - “You’re nothing but a stupid kid who will never amount to anything.”
 - “Watch it wiggle! See it jiggle! Cool and fruity! Jell-o brand gelatin!”
 - Or, more mildly, “You’re such a scaredy-cat!” “Chicken!” Even, “Shut up!”
 - And even though we know that words have hurt us, can we be honest enough to confess that we’ve probably used words that have hurt others?
- The Pharisees have come to Jesus and complained about his followers eating dinner without washing their hands.
 - Why does he respond with these words? “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.”
 - Context: The handwashing that the Pharisees reference was never intended for any place other than the temple.
 - It was a ritual act, meant to ensure that the one performing the temple sacrifice (which was, of course, something that would eventually be eaten) was clean and pure before God.
 - This wasn’t Covid handwashing. This wasn’t any kind of germ-disposal handwashing. And it wasn’t a rite that was required for routine, daily meals.
 - The Pharisees had taken the ritual law of handwashing out of the Temple and into the home.
 - “Thus observing the tradition of the elders...”
 - Not law. Tradition.
 - This isn’t something that God demands, requires, or even needs.

- Jesus understand this. And Jesus is not happy about the Pharisees claiming God’s authority as their own.
 - “You’re a bunch of hypocrites! You talk nicely about me, but you don’t actually love me. And you teach your own rules as if they’re God’s word!”

- The Pharisees exchange with Jesus continues with Jesus reminding them that it is what lies within the human heart that will destroy them, and includes a whole list of sins.
 - They include things that might be visible to others, and those only known to the sinner.

- And then there’s this, from the epistle of St. James, “If any think they are religious and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.”
 - It’s not just things we do or think that hurt ourselves and others.
 - Our very words hurt.

- None of us need to be told that, do we. We already know that what we do, say, and even think can hurt. We’re Lutheran. If you didn’t know it before, you’ve heard enough of it from me in the last year and a half!
 - Hear this, too: Those words that others used that hurt you? They can never take God’s love away from you. They can never diminish your identity as a beloved child of God.
 - Those words that you’ve used that hurt others? They also do not diminish your identity as a beloved child of God.

- The Pharisees were clinging to obedience as their hope for salvation. Jesus shows another way.
 - It is not our obedience that saves us.
 - It is not our words that save us.
 - It is not our faithfulness that saves us.
 - Jesus is salvation.