

**ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA**

August 29, 2021 – PENTECOST 14 / PROPER 17, YR. B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George–Hacker

Sermon: “*What’s the Cure for our ‘Heart Disease’?*”

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9	(Moses commands the people to obey God, for their own good)
Psalms 15	(Those who do right and speak truth may approach God)
James 1:17-27	(Believers are to be doers of God’s word, not just hearers)
St. Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23	(Jesus teaches that all evil begins in the heart and mind)

Isn’t this a beautiful apple? The skin is so red and smooth. It has a nice shape and I don’t see any bruises or spots that look like bugs or worms have eaten into it. I think this will be a tasty apple to enjoy. Ah, but I won’t actually know until I cut into it, will I? No doubt, many of you have had the experience of buying a nice peach, a good-looking tomato, or what seemed to be a perfectly ripe avocado, only to cut it open and find it was rotten to the core.

People can be that way, too. They may seem perfectly fine on the outside, until you get to know what’s on the inside. In today’s Gospel lesson, it is the Pharisees whom Jesus takes to task for outwardly going through the motions of worship, but inwardly failing to engage their hearts. These religious leaders had complained to Jesus that some of His disciples were eating without first washing their hands. Since Jewish laws were very strict about cleaning one’s hands before eating, the Pharisees demanded, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”

Jesus fires back, calling them “hypocrites,” because they were overly concerned about clean hands—and yes, of course, we should be washing our hands a lot in this time of pandemic—but what Jesus is most concerned about is having clean *hearts*.

Apparently, religious hypocrisy was a problem going far back in Israel’s history, for Jesus quotes to them from the prophet Isaiah, written centuries before: “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines. You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

In our time, things haven’t changed much. Some people go to church every Sunday. They carry their Bibles or Prayer Books, bring their offering, sing all the hymns, listen to every word the preacher says, but it doesn’t change anything inside them. They look good on the outside, but their goodness is only skin deep. Their worship is just for appearance and doesn’t impact their inner being or how they live. For them, as for the Pharisees, what’s important are creeds, not deeds.¹

It’s amazing how traditions get passed down. Long ago, a pastor was trying to write his sermon, but his cat kept bothering him, so he tied the cat to the bedpost. His son was also a clergyman, and while working on his message, tied his cat to the bedpost. The grandson went into the ministry, too. One day, his housekeeper saw him tying the cat to the bedpost, and asked: “Why on earth are you doing that to that poor animal?” “I’m not really sure,” he answered, looking greatly puzzled, “it’s just a longstanding tradition.”²

Now don’t get me wrong, tradition and ritual are essential in life. National, religious, cultural, or familial customs offer us the comfort of repetition and familiarity as they lend beauty and meaning to events that otherwise might become mundane. Think about a little child who asks for the same story night after night, or your own delight in keeping the holiday customs as you remember them from childhood. You know how disappointed family members would be, if, for Thanksgiving Dinner, Mom or Grandma veered away from the traditional turkey to pot roast or tuna casserole. Or observe the warm smiles on the faces of fellow parishioners when a favorite old gospel hymn has been chosen for a Sunday.

All of us have traditions we remember and cherish. Some are everyday routines by which we order our existence. Others are beloved and precious because we associate them with memories of love, joy, and special people, from our earliest years. A few, such as celebrating the Eucharist week after week, are holy, and are gifts from God. Those that are mere habits may easily be forgotten or ignored, but those that are enveloped in recollections of affection or sacredness are indispensable.³

The earliest Christians' only traditions were some of the Jewish customs they had inherited. But as the years went by and the first-century Church learned and memorized the words and actions of Jesus, rituals and traditions started to be established. In fact, St. Paul introduced or interpreted many of them, in his writings.

Later, in the Middle Ages, the Church made ritual so paramount that even salvation could supposedly be bought through good works and paid-for indulgences, while the poor starved and presumably went to hell, since under that system, they couldn't afford indulgences. Making an effort to correct these abuses, the Protestant reformation focused on Scriptures showing that faith is paramount. In the doctrine of "justification by faith," we are saved by faith in Christ, alone. Unfortunately, Protestants found ways to misinterpret Paul so that even within Christian society slavery was justified; the denigration of women and children into a lower status was perpetuated; and many wrongs toward the poor or injustices toward those of other races were condoned.⁴ Sadly, these "traditions" still continue in certain places. One only has to think of Afghanistan, now under the control of the Taliban.

Into the fray, along comes the voice of reason in the Letter of James. The author—who may have been Jesus' brother—helps us to get out of the hypocrisy trap when he writes: "Be *doers* of the word, and not merely *hearers* who deceive themselves," he writes.

The noun we translate as "doers" is *poiétés* [poy-ay-tace] in Greek, where it also means a poet, or a "maker," in the sense of creating something artistic. It is closely related to the noun *poiéma* [poy-ay-mah] which means workmanship, or a creation, as in, what God does. We find this in Ephesians 2:10 (NIV) "For we are God's *handiwork*, *created* in Christ Jesus to do good works." So, for us "to do" God's Word after listening to, and internalizing it, suggests that we can be co-creators with God—making the world better, together. If we understood this, it would have profound implications for how we live our lives.

In today's Epistle lesson, it almost seems as if James is inserting himself into the argument Jesus is having with the Pharisees, when he declares: "If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

This fits right in with Jesus asking the Pharisees to think about what is more important, the hand-washing ritual or the feeding of those who are hungry. Is compassion more important than tradition? Christ certainly thinks so. He also calls us to ask ourselves: "What really matters?" Is it the arguments we get into about how to interpret Scripture, what political stance to defend, or even the rituals and traditions we take for granted in The Episcopal Church?

What really matters to us? Doing God's will, or holding onto our own worn-out customs and corrupt habits? Do we care enough about our integrity as Christians—being as faithful on the inside as we appear to be on the outside? Jesus reminds the religious leaders of His day, *and us*, that sin and evil originate in our hearts and minds.

Very few of us ever sin in practice, do wrong, or commit a crime, without first having some idea in our heads, or a feeling in our hearts. Usually, it's because we want something so badly—because what's inside us is pride, anger, covetousness, or lust—that we cross the line from thought into action. Jesus draws a strong link between anger and murder when He says in Matthew 5:21-22, "You have heard ... it was said to the ancients, 'Do not murder' and 'Anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone *who is angry with [another person]* will be subject to judgment." In other words, being angry with someone else is as bad as murdering them!

Some of you may remember the flap over President Jimmy Carter admitting that he had sinned by looking at women other than his wife, Rosalynn. He cited Matthew 5:28, where Jesus says: “Everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Again, Jesus points out the indisputable connection between thought and action, emotions and practice, creeds and deeds.

While the religious leaders were overly preoccupied with the outside of their bodies, and about the dietary laws, Jesus emphasized that the food going into our bodies is not what harms our *souls*. It’s what emerges from our *hearts* and comes out of our *mouths* that has the potential to be truly hurtful and cause great damage.

Once again, James lines up with our Lord’s teaching when he declares (3:6-8 NIV): “The tongue ... is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures ... have been tamed ..., but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” James hits the nail on the head. *We know* how hard it can be to control our tongues. And even if we are able to, what about the nasty, unkind, backbiting thoughts of our hearts that gave rise to what we’ve managed to stifle?

So what’s the remedy for our “heart disease”? It’s the prayer found in Psalm 51, verses 10-12: “*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me by Your generous Spirit.*”

Ask Jesus to catheterize your heart, or to do brain surgery on your mind, to cut out the junk that’s rotting in both. And *be careful* what you put into your head and heart. You’ve heard me cite before the I.T. jargon, “Garbage in, garbage out.” In computing, it means that inputting bad data will produce a flawed output. It’s true for people, too. What we consume intellectually and emotionally does affect how we live.

So let us pray as we do in our opening Collect for Purity: Dear God, “cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you” and live a life of love toward all who cross our paths. In Jesus’ name we pray. *Amen*.

¹ Adapt. “Skin Deep or From the Heart?” [Sermons4kids.com](https://sermons4kids.com), © 2001-2021, <https://sermons4kids.com/skin_deep.htm> 23 August 2021. Used with permission.

² Illustration shared in a class at Lancaster Theological Seminary, Lancaster PA (1991–1993).

³ Adapt. Katerina Katsarka Whitley, “Obedience, Not Ritual” 2 September 2012, [EpiscopalChurch.org](https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/obedience-not-ritual-proper-17-b-2012/), <<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/obedience-not-ritual-proper-17-b-2012/>> 23 August 2021. Used with permission.

⁴ *Ibid*.