Sunday, August 15, 1999
WATCH YOUR MOUTH
Matthew 15:10-20

Jesus had much to say about our mouths, what goes into them, and what can come out. Here are two examples.

“It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.... Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a person.” (Matthew 15:11, 17-20)

“For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure. I tell you, on the day of judgment, you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter: for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” (Matthew 12:33-37)

What’s the background, the context of these statements? The religious tradition in which Jesus grew up had developed all sorts of rules about what one could eat and not eat, what was considered clean and unclean, and how one’s hands had to be washed in preparation for eating.

All of these rules had evolved for the purpose of keeping one pure or clean in a spiritual sense. The system was designed to help one “Be holy as God is holy,” and thereby gain God’s favor. For example, you needed to wash your hands in a certain way before eating because you might have touched someone who was not in your religious tradition and therefore you were spiritually unclean because you hadn’t washed your hands before eating.

For many of us today, a lot of these rules seem trivial and silly. We tend to think of purity in terms of physical cleanliness. But in the time of Jesus, this was not the case. Spiritual purity was neither trivial nor individualistic. Purity was social and political.

Purity was political because it structured society into a purity system. It set up classes of people, a kind of caste system. Purity systems are found in many cultures. They are systems of classifications, lines, and boundaries. A purity system is a kind of cultural map that indicates a place for everything and everyone in its place.

In the political-religious world in which Jesus lived, the purity system established a spectrum of people ranging from the very pure through varying degrees of lesser purity to people on the margins and to the radically impure.

One’s purity status depended to some extent on birth. According to one purity map of the time, priests and Levites (both hereditary classes) came first, followed by Israelites, followed by converts (Jewish persons who were not Jewish by birth). Further down the list were children born out of wedlock and people with physical disabilities.

But one's degree of purity or impurity also depended on one's religious behavior, on how closely one followed the ritual rules. Those who were carefully observant of the purity codes were "the pure" of course. The worst of the non-observant were "outcasts." There were also occupational groups considered less pure than others. Tax collectors and shepherds were considered less pure. That's why the Christmas story is so revealing — because the news of the Messiah's birth is told first by the angels to shepherds, not priests or Levites.

The purity system was also associated with economic status. Being rich did not automatically put one on the pure side, but being poor almost certainly made one impure. To some extent, this association resulted from popular wisdom, which saw wealth as a blessing from God and poverty as an indication that one had not lived right.

Purity and impurity were also associated with the contrast between male and female. As with the wealthy, there was nothing about being a male that made one automatically pure; clearly, there were men who were outcasts. And there was nothing about a woman that automatically made her impure. But generally speaking, men in their natural state were thought to be more pure than women.

Overall, the effect of the purity system at the time of Jesus was to create a world with sharp boundaries between pure and impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, Jew and Gentile.

Now we can understand why Jesus was considered a radical. He was constantly criticizing and calling into question this purity system. Instead of, "Be holy as God is Holy," Jesus taught, "Be compassionate as God is compassionate." He taught that compassion is the dominant quality of God, and he lived that belief. True purity, he was saying, is not a matter of external boundaries — what you eat or don't eat, who you eat with, or how carefully you wash your hands. True purity is how you treat people, how compassionate you are.

This is the background, the context of the story of the Good Samaritan, for example. The priest and the Levite who passed by the injured man in the ditch were obligated to maintain a certain level of purity. Contact with death was a source of major impurity, and the wounded man in the ditch is described as being "half-dead," suggesting that one couldn't tell whether he was dead without coming close enough to incur impurity if he was. Thus, the priest and Levite passed by out of observance of the purity laws. The Samaritan (who, incidentally, was considered radically impure according to the purity system) is described by Jesus as the one who acted "compassionately," in the same way as God is compassionate and wants us to be compassionate.

Watch your mouth! The purity system of Jesus' day had strict rules about one's mouth. However, Jesus was saying there are more important ways of watching your mouth. Jesus' disciples had been criticized because they did not wash their hands properly before they ate and thus were not being pure. In response, Jesus used the incident as an illustration in his teaching.

He said, as I mentioned earlier, "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." In other words, watch your language. Pay attention to what you say and how you say it. You can cause an immense amount of damage by what you say. You can abuse people with your words; you can hurt them. You can spread rumors, lies, and slander, and this can cause trouble.

Jesus went even deeper with his mouth illustration. He said, “What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and that is what defiles.” To paraphrase, what you say and how you say it reveals the kind of person you are. “For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

Some of us can remember the childhood saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” We can try to reassure ourselves with that saying when we are hurt by words, but the truth is, that saying is not true. The wrong kind of words can and do hurt us and others very much, and the right kind of words can be healing.

We’ve all said words that we wish we could have reached out and grabbed, put back in our mouths, and swallowed, but it was too late.

Jesus not only challenged the purity system that put people into rigid categories of clean and unclean in his teachings but also in his actions. The stories of his healings shatter the purity boundaries of his social world. He touched lepers and hemorrhaging women. He entered a graveyard inhabited by a man with an unclean spirit, near the vicinity of pigs, which were of course unclean animals.

Furthermore, one of his most characteristic activities was an open and inclusive table. What kinds of people you would sit down at a table and eat with had significance in Jesus’ social world that is difficult for us to imagine. It was not a casual act, as it can be in the modern world. Rules surrounding meals were deeply embedded in the purity system. Those rules governed not only what might be eaten and how it should be prepared, but also with whom you might eat. Someone who wanted to be pure would not dare eat a meal with someone who was considered an outcast or impure.

It is no accident that for many years following the Civil War, black people and white people could not eat at the same lunch counter or in the same dining rooms in restaurants.

Jesus broke all those rules. The most biting criticisms of Jesus were about his eating habits. They said he would eat with anyone. He was called a glutton and a winebibber. He ate with the rich like Zacchaeus. He ate with the religious like Simon. He ate with publicans and sinners. He ate with the poor, the lame, and the blind. He ate with the political and the non-political. He ate with the righteous and the sinners. In eating with all kinds of people, Jesus was expressing his full acceptance of them.

The open table policy of Jesus was perceived by his critics as a challenge to the purity system, and it was. The meals of Jesus embodied his alternative vision of God’s community as an inclusive community.

Ultimately, of course, the meals of Jesus are the ancestor of what we today call Holy Communion or the Eucharist or the Lord’s Supper. The centrality of meals in the early Christian movement and throughout Christian history goes back to the table fellowship of Jesus.

Unfortunately, we Christians today are often not as inclusive as Jesus. We’re not always sure who should be included. Does an individual have to be a member of a Christian church to receive Communion? Does an individual need to have been baptized? Is it for members only? If you are a member of a congregation in one denomination, can you then receive Communion

in a congregation of another denomination? Some say “yes,” everyone is welcome. Others say “no.” We seem to have forgotten how inclusive Jesus was and, more importantly, how inclusive God is.

The table we gather around for the Lord’s Supper is important, and I believe that all are invited and welcome to it. It is God’s table, not ours.

I remember reading about Scott Peck, and he was telling about his becoming a Christian. Among other things, he said, “One reason I remain non-denominational is I don’t understand how one group of Christians can deny the Lord’s Supper to another group or how we can keep anyone who wants to come to the table away from the table.”

He went on to say, “I fell in with this fast group of nuns three or four years ago before I was baptized, and they accepted me into their community and invited me to take Communion with them. I celebrated the Lord’s Supper quite intensively before I was baptized. To deny the Lord’s Supper to somebody who’s not baptized is like demanding that someone be able to play ‘Chopsticks’ before they can take a piano lesson.”

So, “Watch your mouth,” said Jesus, “not so much what you put into it but what comes out of it.” Be careful what you say and how you say it. Be especially careful that you don’t exclude people whom God includes.

Most of today’s problems among human beings are caused by our not accepting someone else as a brother or sister, even though God created each one of us and therefore God accepts us. So, watch your mouth and your actions. Amen.