

*The Lessons Appointed for Use on the*

**Sunday closest to August 31**

**Proper 17**

**Year B**

**RCL**



James 1:17-27

Psalm 15

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

The Collect

Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things: Graft in our hearts the love of your Name; increase in us true religion; nourish us with all goodness; and bring forth in us the fruit of good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen.

*Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9*

Moses said: So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the LORD your God with which I am charging you.

You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!” For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?

But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children.

*Psalm 15 Page 599, BCP*

*Domine, quis habitabit?*

- 1 LORD, who may dwell in your tabernacle?  
    who may abide upon your holy hill?
- 2 Whoever leads a blameless life and does what is right,  
    who speaks the truth from his heart.
- 3 There is no guile upon his tongue;  
    he does no evil to his friend;  
    he does not heap contempt upon his neighbor.
- 4 In his sight the wicked is rejected,  
    but he honors those who fear the LORD.
- 5 He has sworn to do no wrong  
    and does not take back his word.
- 6 He does not give his money in hope of gain,  
    nor does he take a bribe against the innocent.
- 7 Whoever does these things  
    shall never be overthrown.

*James 1:17-27*

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worth-

less. 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.

**Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23**

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

‘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.”

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Lis-

ten 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. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”





## SERMON

I saw the most interesting quote from the Dalai Lama this week. Interesting in light of this week's text I mean. His Holiness began this way,

Although we are all the same in not wanting problems and wanting a peaceful life, we tend to create a lot of problems for ourselves. Encountering those problems, anger develops and overwhelms our mind, which leads to violence.

I couldn't agree with him more. The last thing I want to do is to increase my store of problems, or undertake things that will impair my peaceful enjoyment of my life. I think we're all that way, and I can't see anything particularly wrong with that, if not taken to extremes. It does seem, though, that we can't just let things be. Perhaps more accurately, we can't seem to leave our brothers and sisters alone. One bright morning we wake up, look around us, and notice that there are people out there that do things differently than we do!

They believe different things! They speak differently! They are clearly NOT LIKE US. They are terrifically annoying, those people. Whatever is to be done about them? Indulging that last question, I think, is what the Dalai Lama is talking about when he speaks of creating a lot of problems for ourselves. Whatever would lead us to imagine that the beliefs of others are any of our business? Whatever would lead us to imagine that we are called upon to do something about people who speak or believe differently than we do?

Well, it depends on who you ask.

I spent as much time, or more, as each of you did at the Capital Theater, and I easily saw as many westerns as you did. It's pretty clear from all of them that there are in this world three kinds of people – the good guys (and their sidekicks), the bad guys (and their henchmen) and the nameless, faceless, featureless townspeople who are mostly part of the scenery, and whose only job is to

be victimized by the bad guys and then express adoration and gratitude to the good guys. That's all there is in God's creation, cause Hoppy said so, and I was raised on Hopalong Cassidy.

Where do we fit in? I'm clearly not part of the scenery, so am I good guy or bad guy? Well, I'm a pretty nice fellow, most of the time, anyway, and you're nice people. So, logically, we must be the good guys. Good guys act like us, speak like us, believe like us. So, those who don't act like us, speak like us, believe like us are not the good guys, and the only other alternative is that they must be the bad guys. It's thus up to us to ... um ... wipe them off the face of the earth. **And** the horse they rode in on...

Thus, we discover why there is no fifth Gospel of Hopalong Cassidy in our Bibles. This pernicious view of God's children is foreign to the Gospel brought to us by Jesus, who stubbornly insists that He, not we, is the

way, the truth and the light.

This is a vitally important thing to keep in mind, that Jesus, not we, is the way, the truth and the light. If we forget it, it is very likely that we shall try to define our own righteousness for ourselves. When we do that, we will, sure as you're born, define unrighteousness as something the other guy does, not something we do. That's how we are. The Book of Proverbs reminds us, "All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes". Boy! Are we good at that! By way of contrast, there are few things in the world as satisfying as finding a Biblical verse indicating that God hates something you aren't! When you find a passage like that, just as the Dalai Lama indicates, the occasion is ripe for you to make trouble for yourself. You may even feel you are within your rights to become so angry with whoever is doing whatever it is that you're not doing that God hates so much that you can become the avenging arm of God to

restore God's plan to His Creation. I ran into a man once who told me that he was a great prayer warrior, come to defeat Satan. I asked him if he didn't think that if God wanted Satan defeated, He might be up to the task, all by Himself. He told me I was one of Satan's legions.

In a recent piece in Esquire, Shane Claiborne noted, "A recent study showed that the top three perceptions of Christians in the U. S. among young non-Christians are that Christians are 1) antigay, 2) judgmental, and 3) hypocritical.<sup>1</sup>" Great job we're doing, spreading the good news that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son".

The message Jesus brought was nothing like that, and disarmingly simple. It was this:

- The Creator of everything, who sustains you every second of every day, is not an opinion. I am here. I am He.
- The Creator of everything, who sustains you every

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.esquire.com/features/best-and-brightest-2009/shane-claiborne-1209#ixzz24rQBO1IA>

second of every day, has plans for you, to do you good and not evil, for He loves you.

- The Creator of everything, who sustains you every second of every day, would like you to know that things will go a lot smoother if you will trust Him to worry about you, so that you can dedicate your time to caring for His other children.

Worrying about the welfare of our brothers and sisters is nowhere near as entertaining as being the avenging arm of God, come to smite the people that do whatever it is that you don't do that God hates. It has always been so, I'm afraid, even during Jesus' time on Earth. It's hard for us, so far removed in time and culture, to relate at a gut level with the conversation that we have today between Jesus and some religious authorities, but that is the gist of it. Jesus comes to offer them the good news that God is more interested in a contrite heart than in self-righteousness, and the religious authorities of the time don't buy it. They focus on the rituals and traditions they know best.

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. ... So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”

This should be intensely interesting to you. Remember, Jesus has no credentials. He is not a scribe. He is not a Temple official. He can claim no high title. He's a rube from the sticks, but some big shots have come to see him, all the way from Jerusalem. I don't think they did that because they enjoyed travel in First Century Judea, and I don't think they did that because they wanted to unmask a fraud. There were plenty of frauds a good deal closer to Jerusalem to go after, if that is what they wanted to do. These men had heard of miracles beyond the usual tales of miracles, and they came to see for themselves.

It doesn't take much imagination to suggest who they expected to see. They are Jews. They have come to see a miraculous Jew, someone just like them whose life was strictly ruled by Jewish law, and who scrupulously followed the Commandments. What other sort of Jew could so gain God's favor that he could do miracles? Didn't Moses tell the people:

So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the LORD your God with which I am charging you.

You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!"

What they found instead was a liberal! His disciples were not following the traditions of the elders. Worse



yet, their teacher, Jesus, saw nothing wrong with this. SECULAR HUMANISM, I tell you!

I've heard quite reasonable people say that this whole passage is all about Jesus abolishing Jewish law, root and branch. They tell me that Jewish law had become so convoluted that Jesus came to abolish it, along with the Jewish way of worship, and to institute a new way of worship in tidy Presbyterian churches — decently and in good order and without unnecessary ornamentation.

No He wasn't! Jesus lived and died a Jew. What the scribes were doing was exactly the same thing we've been talking about. They've found someone who does things differently, who thinks differently, who acts differently, and they are not happy with it. They're the religious authorities. They're the ministers, if you will, the ones that have dedicated their lives and taken up the livelihood of protecting the purity of the faith. They are

the most conservative of the conservatives! They, of all people, know what God has demanded of His covenant people, and this ain't it.

Because First Century Jewish worship is so foreign to anything that goes on in Greenup County, it's a wonderful, liberating thought to imagine that Jesus was telling the Scribes that they're the bad guys. It's wonderfully comforting to think that Jesus came to institute worship just like we do now, because that makes us the good guys, and it's fantastic to have both God and Hopalong Cassidy on our side.

It's also nonsense. Jesus came to say that the Torah, and Temple worship, and the Commandments, are all ways to set the people aside as God's people by focusing their minds and their hearts on the Covenant, but they are not ends unto themselves. The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath, as the Rabbis say. To miss the message of Jesus would be like a physician cel-

celebrating the treatment and ignoring the cure.

It's nice to know that the Dalai Lama sees things pretty much the same way, for after he states the problem,

Although we are all the same in not wanting problems and wanting a peaceful life, we tend to create a lot of problems for ourselves. Encountering those problems, anger develops and overwhelms our mind, which leads to violence.

He offers us the same solution:

A good way to counter this and to work for a more peaceful world is to develop concern for others. Then our anger, jealousy and other destructive emotions will naturally weaken and diminish.

We find it so hard to be FOR something without first finding something to be AGAINST. It's as if to take up an issue, we have first to define an enemy to struggle against, then we become so fascinated with the struggle that we seldom get around to the issue. Gene and Roy and Hoppy rode into town, guns blazing, and violently

defeated Satan on Main Street, but when did we see any of them run a soup kitchen, or comfort a grief stricken parent in the loss of their child? It's as if they thought they were called to single-handedly and violently expunge evil from Creation, but not to bring light and love into it.

It is not so. In the Epistle credited to James, the brother of our Lord, he advises us to

let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. ...

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act – they will be blessed in their doing.

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.

Jesus is laser clear that the important things to which we must address our attention are our own internal dialogs, not other people's actions.

For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.

We aren't called to condemn others or expunge what we believe to be evil from the world. We are called to master ourselves. Not to hammer on the Dalai Lama, but he does have a way with words. "The first beneficiary of compassion is always oneself" he said. If you will take the time to connect to the indwelling Holy Spirit, if you will heed His urging, and measure what you think

you hear against James' warning that your anger does not produce God's righteousness then you will learn true compassion. Once you do that, as Jesus taught in many ways, things will go a lot smoother for you and all God's children.

AMEN

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*Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.*

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