**Sermon – Proper 15A 2020, Pastor Peter**

*(Isaiah 56:1,6-8; Psalm 67; Romans 11:1-2a,29-32; Matthew 15:10-28)*

*Matthew 15:19-20a*

***For out of the heart come evil thoughts – murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a person …***

*Isaiah 56:1,6a,7a*

***This is what the LORD says: ‘Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed….***

***And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants… these I will bring to my holy mountain***

***and give them joy in my house of prayer.***

*Romans 11:30-31*

***you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy…so they too.***

Lord God, teach us to judge from the heart, not what we see on the outside, but what we know to be on the inside. Speak to us your truth, for this your word is truth. Amen.

Last week while I was on holidays, I received a surprise text message from a family friend in Victoria. It was from a young woman who is striving hard to be a faithful Christian, and who wants to influence her friends to be equally committed. She’s been in discussion with them over a certain topic, and she was asking my opinion about a certain matter.

Let me share with you her message.

*Dear Uncle Peter [I’m not actually her uncle, but her parents are old friends of mine, and our children have grown up respectfully referring to parents as aunty and uncle]*

*I Hope you are well!*

*I have a question for you about tattoos; is a sin or not?*

*I have been taught that it is and I still believe that as your body is a temple [of the Holy Spirit] you should respect it. As well as not [wanting to] conform to worldly ideas [Romans 12:2a]. But my friends tell me that I can’t use the verse in Leviticus [19:28] as proof because those laws are abolished since Jesus came, and that also cutting your hair [Lev 19:27], having piercings or painting nails [would] also be a sin.*

*I just never really know how to respond to this.*

My response to my young friend was to get her to think not about what we see on the outside, but rather learn to look at the inside of a person. Remembering what is written in 1 Samuel; ***For…‘The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.’*** *(1Samuel 16:7)*

Unknowingly I actually made reference to the gospel reading for this Sunday, where Jesus teaches the disciples that what makes us unclean before God is not about what we put into (or onto) our bodies, but what already resides within; ***“For out of the heart come evil thoughts – murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a person…”*** *(Matt 15:19f)*

It’s easy for us to get hung up with rules and regulations thinking these are the things that make us real Christian. We like rules to a certain degree because they can keep us safe. Right now many people in WA love that fact that our boarders are generally closed to the eastern states and to overseas travellers because this potentially will keep us safe from infection by the corona virus.

Although it’s not full proof as people in NZ have recently discovered! But not all rules are helpful or can live up to what they promise. Our state parliament is trying to use rules and regulations in their combat with mining magnate Clive Palmer, but legislation is not always the answer.

In Jesus’ day the Pharisees loved their legislation about keeping themselves clean - the washing of hand and pots after having been to the market places and the forbidding of certain foods – but Jesus offended the Pharisees by saying these laws didn’t keep one clean before God, since the problem is of the heart, and not of the body.

In my reply to my young friend I told her while our bodies are a temple it’s really about the heart, for that is where the Holy Spirit resides. And for her to accept that there are people with tattoos who truly love and follow God, and there are people with unmarked bodies who have unclean hearts. We are not to judge people by their outward appearance, but instead by learning to discern their heart’s desires.

As a practical lesson, Matthew in his gospel account (as also in Mark’s gospel account 7:14-30) next tells the story of a Canaanite woman who follows after Jesus and his disciples begging for their help in healing her daughter. The disciples want to send her away because she is an outsider, and their Jewish upbringing has told them that contact with her would make them unclean. But Jesus doesn’t judge the woman by her outward appearance, he discerns her heart, and recognises her as a woman of faith, even though she is a non-Jew. His ensuing conversation with her about having been sent only for the ‘lost sheep of Israel’ and about not ‘taking the children’s bread and tossing it to the dogs’ is really a test for the disciples who are listening on to this conversation more than for the woman herself. For she proves herself with her dogged reply, ***‘Yes Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.’*** *(Matt 15:27)*

And because of her heart and her faith, Jesus grants her request and heals her daughter.

Just like the disciples, we too need to learn that God desires heartfelt mercy more than blind naïve obedience. This was Saint Paul’s dilemma with his beloved fellow Jews. For the last few Sunday you may have been following the readings from Romans chapters 9-11. It’s in these chapters that Paul reveals his anguish for his fellow Jews who have chosen to reject Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. ***‘2 I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. 3 For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, 4 the people of Israel… 6 For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel...*** *(Rom 9:2ff)*

***‘1 Brothers and sisters, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. 2 For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. 3 Since they did not know the righteousness of God*** *[that comes to us in Christ Jesus]* ***and sought to establish their own…***

***10 For it is with your heart that you believe*** *[in Jesus Christ]* ***and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith*** *[in Christ]* ***and are saved. 11 As Scripture says, ‘Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.’*** *(Rom 10:1ff)*

***‘5 So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. 6 And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace... 30 You who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy… 31 so they too.*** *(Rom 11:5ff)*

God - who looks at the heart and does not judge us by outward appearances - is a God of grace and mercy.

Therefore, we too should not judge people by their outward appearance or background or current circumstances, but we need to take time to truly come to know them by their heart, and allow God’s grace and mercy to lead us to help them according to their needs.

It’s not about our obedience to rules and regulations that makes us safe and righteous before God. What God asks of us is to put our faith in Jesus as our Saviour, just like the Canaanite woman did, trusting in God’s mercy and grace, and not in our own goodness.

Amen.