

Guard Your Newsfeed

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

“This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” (Mark 7:6)

Today’s theme, Guard Your Newsfeed, asks us to be alert to what we take in, to what we allow into our hearts and into our lives.

But I’d like to begin this morning with a few words about yesterday’s funeral service for Senator John McCain. As you know, he is being buried today a short walk from here on the grounds of the Naval Academy. Two things came across to me yesterday as I listened to former presidents, friends and family eulogize McCain. First was the beauty of solemnity. I loved hearing the cadences of those familiar prayers from our burial service and watching the measured, graceful and inexorable movement of the liturgy.

I also loved the repeated reminders that when all else is stripped away, one of the core parts of our identity is that we are Americans. Yes, we are black and white, Republicans and Democrats, gay and straight. I do not say this as some sort of platitude that ignores our differences or sugar coats our struggles. Believe me, I know how hard we can bang against each other, how we can demean, insult and belittle each other.

But I also know that in my travels abroad it seems the first thing people notice about me is that I am an American. And it was good to hear that essential truth embraced yesterday and extolled as something good, something to be cherished. I don’t know about you, but I have had enough of division. Perhaps the reminder of our shared identity is one of Senator McCain’s parting gifts.

Now, in today’s gospel we find Jesus trying to get us to focus our attention on the actions that stem from our hearts. As you recall from last week, Father Tim reminded us that our ancient ancestors regarded the heart as the seat of our intentions.

The Lord has been on quite a journey, casting out demons, feeding thousands and astounding people with a new and powerful teaching, all the while making disciples and enemies. The Pharisees and the Herodians are already plotting to kill him. Now we find him arguing with the Pharisees over rituals, but more importantly what lies at the heart of those rituals, their *raison d’être*, if you will. The commandment to wash hands began with the best intentions. Initially, the Bible limited it to priests and their families. The Pharisees and the elders extended it to include all Jews, thus symbolically making every home a temple and the people a royal priesthood. Nothing wrong with that.

But as is so often the case, our best intentions get corrupted. The Pharisees forgot the ritual’s original intent and instead turned its observance into a way to decide who was holy and who was not. Turns out Jesus and Isaiah were right:

“This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. In vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrine.” (Mark 7:6-7)

Today's gospel passage begins with an argument over ritual cleanliness and food and ends with a warning to be careful about what we take into our souls. "Guard your newsfeed," as I said earlier.

When Jesus said, "There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile," he was talking about food. But what about the things we hear, see and read? These can indeed defile. They can distort our vision and rupture our relationship with the world. Jesus lived in an oral age of storytellers and travelling teachers. We live in a cyber age where, thanks to the algorithms of social media companies, we can lose ourselves in our own private, parallel universe where none of our convictions are challenged and all our fears become real.

The things outside of us, the newsfeeds that pour in, often welcomed and unfiltered, can defile our hearts. Jesus lists a dozen evil intentions that then, as now, occur when our guard is down.

I'm thinking about Dylann Roof visiting all the white supremacist internet sites, the hatred pouring in day after day, emboldening him to where, at the age of 21, he could walk into Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and kill nine people in hopes of starting a race war.

Or, how about Edgar Maddison Welch, who went into the Comet Ping Pong pizza shop in Washington, D.C., armed with an AR-15 rifle to investigate a supposed child sex ring run by members of the Democratic Party.

Check your newsfeeds, brothers and sisters. There are things outside a person that by going into our hearts can destroy us. And it need not be extreme or distorted information. It can just be the news of the day.

There was a point awhile back where it seemed I was hearing about every black person who was getting dissed in America. A couple of brothers went into a Starbucks in Philly to wait for a client and ended up in jail. A family held a bar-b-cue in Oakland, California, and had the people called on them. A 14-year-old boy asking for directions to his high school in a Detroit suburb was fired upon by a guy wielding a 12-gauge shotgun.

I tell you. I had to take a break from Yahoo and Facebook. There was too much bad news pouring in. It had me looking over my shoulder whenever I went into Starbucks, and that can happen twice a day, once in the morning on Main Street, and once in the evening back home on Charles Street. I had to turn off my social media newsfeed and dig a little deeper into the other newsfeed available to us all – the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Good News, of God's power at work in the world. I didn't do this so I could escape from or ignore the world, but so that I could be strengthened to face the world.

"Your words were found," the prophet Jeremiah said in a moment of inspiration, "and I ate them, and your words became a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O Lord, God of hosts." (Jeremiah 15:16)

Called to do what? To merely read the word? To merely hear the word? No! We are called to take it in, to let it dwell richly in us, to, as the collect says, read, mark, learn, inwardly digest, and then do. St. James urges this upon us. Because it is possible to hear the word and not be transformed, to deceive ourselves by adhering to rituals while the word of God rolls off our hearts like water on concrete.

We don't want to be those people who give lip service to the Lord, while our hearts remain unmoved. No. We are doers of the word, making real the pure, undefiled religion that seeks to mend in ways large

and small the brokenness of the world. The widows and orphans mentioned in today's epistle symbolize the vulnerable and helpless among us, the victims of systems in need of correction.

"You do well," says St. James, "if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (James 2:8)

And St. Paul echoes today's message in his letter to the Romans, where he says: "It is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified." (Romans 2:13)

And finally Jesus, upon hearing blessings offered for his beloved mother, replies with his beatitude: "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!" (Luke 11:28)

And who are they, these obedient servants of the word of God? Are they super Christians? No. They are just beautiful and imperfect vessels like you and me who have received the implanted word that has the power not only to save us, but also to empower us to do more than we can imagine. They are every man, woman and child who strives to mirror their faith in their lives.

Know this, brothers and sisters, what we take in will find expression in our lives. So, guard your cyber and spiritual newsfeeds. Take care. And may your hearts be drawn ever closer to God.

Amen.

Delivered by the Rev. M. Dion Thompson on September 2, 2018.