

Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Pastor Robert Goldstein

September 2, 2018

I watched the funeral service for John McCain at the National Episcopal cathedral yesterday. I was very touched by the poignancy of the liturgy – vergers and all (they were the persons who guided service participants to the appropriate places to read or speak). It was a fond farewell to a national leader and emphasized the civility that needs to be the character of our national disagreements.

As the camera gave a full-length view of the central nave, I noticed that here were much of the political elite of our nation. Many were dealing with their own grief. But some looked uncomfortable, some distracted, some bored. Perhaps the service was “too Catholic” for some. Perhaps others had difficulty staying still in body and mind. Some were probably preoccupied with how to take political advantage of a nave full of the elite. Who knows what’s in their hearts?

And that is the point –we need to be a lot humbler in our prognoses of others’ behavior. But that is not the case with Jesus with the religious elite in the Gospel today. He judges, and he judges rather harshly –not as an example for us, but because of what was really at stake.

**Some of his disciples are eating with dirty hands.** This fact galls the Pharisees and the scribes. For we are told it is their tradition that hands and all foodstuffs must be washed, and all cooking and serving utensils likewise clean.

Just as our parents taught us. So dirty hands are not quite the problem.

What is not obvious here is the **pride of class**. Many followers of Jesus are the poverty-stricken underclass of the day —those who have been left out of any opportunities, any real future. They're probably dirty, eat with their mouths wide open, know little about personal hygiene, and are cruder in language.

It is hard enough to access water just to wash their hands. They rarely have much food, and perhaps a little pot. Life is a daily struggle to find food to put in that pot.

This class criticism also picks on Jesus' poor followers do not know the finer details of their religion. Few clergy had ever bothered to address their needs. It's like blaming a homeless person for having dirty hands and clothes.

So here are the middle and poor classes of Judeans. The middle class have all the niceties of dress, manners, and their religious rituals. The poor come with nothing —except Jesus' words of compassion, which rings true to them. Some do wash their hands. Others are able to barely share so all can eat with Jesus.

In the poor's dirty hands and clothes there is a dignity of compassion for one another —sharing so all could eat. But the Pharisees and the scribes are indignant because without clean hands, clean foods and clean dishes the Pharisees consider them not ready to belong to their religious community.

It is this obsession with religious procedures that separates the middle class from their fellow human beings that Jesus cannot abide. Traditions are more important than love, than compassion. That's what galls Jesus. In effect, Jesus says, if you cannot love your fellow human beings because of your external doctrines of cleanliness, you are completely missing the point of life in God!

Love your neighbor as yourself is the commandment of God. But you use your social class and cleanliness regulations to put up a wall, to keep your poverty-stricken neighbor at a distance. And this tells me, says Jesus, that you live in your self-righteous pride. Once again, external wealth and external traditions are a sign to you that you are chosen by God above your dirty neighbor.

We have to examine ourselves. To obey the great command to love one another, there cannot be any material wealth or human doctrines that put a wall, even a border wall between us and people in need. As a nation, and as Christians, we are better than walls. We were, and one day, we will be better than walls.

**What really kill us are the internal things that disobey the commandment to love.** God doesn't give a fig for our Lutheranism, our achievements or wealth, when we secretly live by theft, murder, adultery, avarice, deceit, envy, slander or pride.

We are gathered to confess to God when these vices get the better of us. For we all have frailties. Worse still is our being so blind to our sins that we feel superior to others.

Liturgy and church order –they are there for good order. But if they are used to excuse us from daring to love our neighbor, from daring to love the homeless and the poor, to not protest this government which in glaring

greed takes the little monies of the poor and middle class to give the rich, then we have lost our way.

What excuse do you have for not loving the poor, for not fighting the injustices committed against the powerless? Liturgy trains us to love day by day. Liturgy uplifts us to action for all of God's peoples. By god's help, we can do it! Amen.