Sermon
Aug 30, 2009
Texts: Deut. 4, James 1:17-27, Mark 7:1-23

What does it mean to be God's people? If we look closely at today's readings, we can see that in biblical times there were two very different ways of answering that question. On the one hand, there were the people who were very careful about observing the law that God had given through Moses. They understood that law as having a very specific purpose: that of establishing a holy people who would be different and separate from everyone else. They separated everyone into two different categories: the clean and the unclean. The clean people were the good observant ones who were very careful about keeping God's law literally. They wouldn't touch any food that wasn't clean or kosher. They were careful to wash their hands before they ate and to stay away from everything that was impure. They viewed the world as a place that was dirty and contaminated, and thus something to keep one's distance from. I guess the best comparison would be what we lived through several months ago with the swine flu: everyone wearing a mask to keep out the air breathed by other people and making sure to constantly wash their hands so as to protect themselves from being contaminated by others. When that kind of thinking is applied to our faith life, it involves seeing everyone else as people to be avoided, as a threat to one's well-being, and affirms the need to keep one's distance from everyone else.

When we look to Jesus' words, however, we see a different way of understanding the idea of being God's people. In our Gospel lesson, Jesus says that what makes a person clean or unclean is not the avoidance of any type of contact with the supposedly polluted world around you, a life of separating oneself from those who are labelled as impure because they do not live according to God's law. Rather, what makes a person unclean is treating others unjustly and doing harm to them: Jesus says, "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." That means that what makes people clean or unclean is the way they treat others.

So we see two different ways of thinking. On the one hand, the idea of some was that God's people were just those on the inside, who were to maintain themselves pure by avoiding contact with those outside, who were *not* God's people. But on the other hand, Jesus' idea is that what matters is reaching out to those on the outside. In other words, God's people are not just those *on the inside*, but those *on the outside as well*, because God cares just as much about them as he does about those who define themselves as his followers. In other words, according to Jesus, God creates a community of people not for its own sake, as if God simply cared about having a pure people separated from everyone else, but for the sake of others: God creates a community so that it can reach out to others in love and serve as a force against everything that harms others and does them wrong.

We can observe the same basic idea in our first reading for today, where God tells the people of Israel that he has given them the law, not just for themselves, but because he cares about the other people around them. In essence, Moses there says that other peoples will be attracted to God when they see what God has done among the people of Israel. God cared just as much about those other people than he did about Israel; God wanted them to be his people as well.

In our second reading, James says that the religion that is pure and undefiled before is to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. If we look at this passage in the original Greek language, however, it can also be understood in the sense that when one is caring for orphans and widows, one is in that way keeping oneself unstained by the world. In that case, it is by reaching out to those in need that one is made pure, not by isolating oneself from the world.

All of that is important for us to remember as individuals and as a congregations. To live as Christians is not to think that we alone are special in God's sight, and that we are somehow better than others or that God cares about us more than others, as if we alone were God's people. According to Jesus, God's people are not just us but everyone out there, whom God loves and cares about just as much as he cares about us. And that means that the way that we keep our hearts and ourselves clean and pure is not by distancing ourselves from those around us, but reaching out to them. When Jesus reached out to those who were considered impure or unclean in his day, such as the lepers, the non-Jews, the woman with hemorrhaging and people with various illnesses, many of the Jews of his day believed that by doing so he was making himself impure. But in the thought of Jesus and his followers, it was the other way around: the impure and unclean were made pure and clean by the touch of Jesus. That is true for us today as well: when we reach out to those in need and those who are rejected by others and considered unworthy of God's love, both we and they are cleansed and made into new people.

To live a truly Christian life as Jesus' disciples, then, is not about isolating ourselves from others but engaging with them. God's plan wasn't to create a community that would be separate from everyone else, supposedly holy and pure untouched by sin and evil. That isn't the kind of church we are called to be, or the kind of Christians we are called to be. Instead, we are called to be people who see others just as we see ourselves: as sinners and imperfect people who are in need of God's grace and love and forgiveness, just like us. And we can truly call ourselves God's people only when we see ourselves as one with them, and regard them as God's people just as much as we are. What makes us impure and unclean is not reaching out to others but failing to love them as we ought, and instead doing them harm through our words and deeds, as Jesus says, or simply ignoring them. That is what real impurity is all about.

So follow Jesus in reaching out to others as those who by grace are part of God's people together with you, rather than condemning and rejecting them as if you were holy and they were not. Avoid whatever harms others and does them wrong, as Jesus teaches, and instead share God's unconditional love with all. Only as you do that will you know what it's like to have a heart that has been cleansed and purified by the grace of God. Amen.