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**15<sup>TH</sup> SUN. A. PENTECOST      SEPT. 2, 2018**

**PROPER 17 (B)      ST. PAUL'S, OSSINING**

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Song of Solomon 2:8-13

Psalm 42:1-2,7-10

James 1:17-27

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

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*"Open our eyes, O Lord, to see your Glory; open our ears, to hear your Truth; open our hearts, Lord God, and set our souls on fire." - OR -*

*"To you we turn, O Lord, for you are the Truth, and the Truth shall set us free."*

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### **RULES, RULES, RULES**

*"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..."*

[ - Collect for Proper 17. ]

## *Rules, rules, rules....*

It was the middle of the night, in the middle of nowhere. *Two cars*, coming in opposite directions, both cross ever so slightly over the *white line* in the center of the road. They collide – *sideswipe* each other – and a fair amount of damage is done, although neither driver is hurt. It is impossible, however, to clearly pin *blame* for the accident on either driver.

The drivers climb out of their cars and share how lucky they feel to be *unhurt*. One of the drivers is a *doctor*; the other is a *lawyer*. The lawyer calls 911, and the police say that since no one is hurt, they'll be there in 10-15 minutes. It's *cold* and *damp* – a dreary Fall night – and both men were shaken up. The lawyer offers the doctor a drink of *brandy* from his hip flask. The doctor *thanks* the lawyer and *accepts*, and *drinks*, and hands the flask back to the lawyer, who puts it away.

*"Aren't you going to have a drink, too?"* the doctor asks.

*"I'll have one after the police leave,"* the lawyer replies.

Think about it: there's surely a *reason* that Jesus *never hit it off* with the lawyers in the Temple. The episode in today's Gospel is but one of *many* that record Jesus' contentious relationship with the lawyers of his day – the Scribes and Pharisees.

*What was the rub?* They considered Jesus to be a *lawbreaker*. He violated the rules for the *Sabbath*; he wasn't all that fastidious about *fasting*; he touched the *unclean lepers* and defied the *cleanliness code*; and he dined with the impious and irreligious on a regular basis.

And yet, Scripture *never* depicts Jesus ever feeling the slightest bit *uncomfortable* with all this; he never is described as blushing or being the least bit self-conscious when caught flaunting the law: no *shame* or *guilt* or *remorse*, or any sense of public embarrassment, at his flagrant lack of religious correctness.

In Jesus' view, the lawyers – the Scribes and Pharisees – were confusing a *code of behavior* with true *deference to God*. They had succumbed to the sin of idolatry. They were *substituting* the *Visible* for the *Invisible*. They had bowed before the Controllable instead of kneeling before the Uncontrolled One.

As Arnold Toynbee put it in his work An Historian's Approach to Religion: "*All religions start with a promise of universality but they deteriorate into a concern for particularity.*" We see it all the time: the promise of universalism – of Divine Love, of Truth, Grace, Mercy – turns into a squirrel-cage of "Do's" and "Don'ts". Over time, *external nitpicking* replaces the core of the defining *revelation*. The result is a kind of 'heart disease' that infects the legalists themselves.

***Rules cannot replace revelation.*** Rules cannot change the human heart. Rigid stipulations tied to the threat of punishment might keep people from each others' throats, but adherence to the letter of the law – "sticking to the rules" – will *not* make anyone Godlike.

The late Clarence Jordan, author of the Cotton Patch Gospels and founder of the multi-racial Koinania community in Americus, Georgia, in the 1940's, always spoke about *inward character* as the foundation of "Kingdom righteousness". Jordan maintained - along with Jesus - that the *way* a person did a thing, and *why* he or she did it, were as important as *what* the person did.

*Attitude* - not just the act itself - was of paramount importance. To bring the point home, Clarence Jordan would ask: *would chaining a vicious dog to a tree so that it wouldn't bite anyone mean that it was a "good" dog?* Obviously not, because the dog's "goodness" would only be in direct proportion to the strength of its *chain*. If, however, the dog were tamed and made gentle, then the need for a chain would be unnecessary. Externals wouldn't be needed if the internals were right.

G.K. Chesterton once commented: *"The word 'good' has many meanings. For example, if a man were to shoot his mother at a range of 500 yards, I should call him a good shot, but not necessarily a good man."*

Nowhere in the four Gospels is Jesus ever astounded by anyone's righteousness. Never is he impressed by someone's education, prominence, cleverness or ritual exactitude. Only one thing amazed and impressed him: *true faith* -- faith that came from the heart, the most important anatomical term in Scripture.

*The heart* holds this unequaled significance not because it pumps blood through our bodies; nor because it does the equivalent work in 1 hour to lift a weight of 1.4 metric tons more than a foot off the ground; nor because when it stops beating, we stop living.

It's because the 'heart' (as we define it) is the center of our *emotions*, our *values* and *priorities* – the source of wisdom, understanding, and discernment. Our heart is like an *umbilical cord* to our true selves. It is the *entry-point* of joy, love, and courage – or of pride, ill-temper, and general evil. The heart can be as *clear* as a mountain stream, or as *sullied* as the Gowanus Canal. And generally speaking, it is a mix of the two.

*But here's the point:* externals will do little to change that, according to Jesus. Diet and fastidious observance of rituals and rules will simply be like chaining a dog to a tree. He was after *much more* – he calls us to *transformation*, to radical change from the inside out.

Modern medicine might not yet have found a foolproof answer to heart disease – but Jesus proclaims that there is a cure: the grace of a loving God, and the willingness to become new – from the inside out.

*... And it's never too late to begin. Now?*

AMEN.

REV. TONY HOETZEL

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