

“What Comes Out of a Person”

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We are in what is called ordinary time, and sometimes it feels like, because its ordinary, we kind of forget about it a little bit. It seems that in some of the creeds it goes from birth to death, to crucifixion, to resurrection and there is only a comma between the birth and the death. I may have mentioned this before, but I think sometimes we need to pay attention to what’s at the comma. Most of the gospel takes place during the comma. It is an invitation then as we pay attention to think about who Jesus is and what his life was like and what he taught us.

Situations like this one we read about today as he talks with the Pharisees and the crowd, and then his disciples, he points out, humans’ problems, they use whatever means available to justify themselves, including religious means. It’s what the Pharisees have done. It’s easy for us as human beings, I think, to want to forget some of this comma material. We want to think of ourselves as good, wonderful people. And yet, Jesus is pointing out that the human heart is not always full of goodness and light. I know some of us experiencing the pandemic were invited to do a little reflection because of that isolation and because of the struggles of dealing with it. Some of us noticed some problems with ourselves that we had been glossing over. This passage invites me not to gloss over, but to look more deeply.

You know, I usually look to Jesus for Grace, and yet this passage invites me to see something that seems hard, as I listen to Jesus, particularly at the end of this passage, Jesus is not offering a grace that says you have no problems. Rather we find a list of our problems. What do we do when we read a list like this? It’s easy to say, well, those are a lot of words I don’t use a lot and I don’t think I am really one of those. At this point I suspect need, and I feel the invitation to look more deeply. I want to take that list for just a moment and walk through it, some of them are pretty clear but there are some nuances that come from some of those words that I think are interesting.

The first word in the list is fornication which means sexual immorality, promiscuity, and in the Old Testament it’s a euphemism for idolatry, because it’s an idea we make something so important we forget about God. Second is the word theft, and the nuance with theft is that it’s a theft that is done under cover. It’s a thievery done secretly, through stealth, through fraud. I suppose most people probably steal when other people aren’t around, but that idea that we are “pulling it over” on someone is in there.

Murder, adultery, some things don’t seem to change. Then there is avarice, it is not a word I use every day, so it’s helpful for me to look again at what it might mean. In Greek the word avarice really means, the desire for more things, a lusting for a greater number of temporal things. Then comes wickedness. Wickedness here is really the idea of malice, it’s the idea that you want to cause somebody else pain because of whatever is going on in your own life. And then there is deceit, it is not just saying something that’s false, it’s a deceit motivated by guile; it is a kind of a thought-out deceit that uses decoys to snare and deceive people and it implies treachery to exploit the naïve. Licentiousness, a violent spite which rejects restraint and indulges in lawless rudeness; that is a mouth full. Shamelessness is another way of thinking about it. A shamelessness that doesn’t care about what other people think, to the point of being violent in our relationships with one another, at least a psychological violence.

Then there is one that's listed, envy, which is a way of thinking about what the actual word here means. Since we don't often talk about giving people the evil eye anymore, that's the actual word that is here, and it means, perhaps, causing harm to another by glancing at them with evil intent. Proverbs goes a little bit further and says, somebody with an evil eye hastens after riches. And so there's that idea of wanting what others have, that is where they get the envy I think. Having evil intent because we want what others have. And then, there's slander. You know I kind of like these definition pieces so, bear with me here, slander is to be slow or sluggish to call something good, and slow to identify what is truly bad; therefore it is the idea that it switches right for wrong, and wrong for right. Then, pride, which literally means excessive shining, that is the root of this word, it's the idea of self-exaltation or self-absorption which carries its own self-destructive vanity. Folly, describes the inherent condition of someone lacking good decisions probably because they don't really want to pay attention to the cause and effects, because they couldn't do what they wanted otherwise; it is a failure to pay attention to the causes and effects in relationships. And finally, it talks about all these as evil, as an evil word. Evil here really means something that produces inevitable agonies or misery. I hope it wasn't to miserable walking through all of those.

For me that expansion of those words reminds me that I can find myself in them. Jesus identifies in this list the evil that can come out of the human heart, that which defiles a person. He is also suggesting that there is another way, an alternative heartfelt approach, and having an alternative gives me hope. The hope lies in the indication that I don't have to live in ways that causing others pain. This passage in that way offers us grace in the face of our ability to express ourselves in evil ways.

While this particular passage doesn't go on to describe what the Ephesians passage does, it invites us to remember that when we turn to Jesus and have paid attention to the surprising gift of forgiving love that he brings, we can be different. Ephesians suggest the things we need to eschew in a different way and expands how we do it. First we must put away falsehoods and deal with our anger, deny evil a mouthpiece, put away all bitterness, wrath, anger, slander, and malice. Again, another list, it feels a little bit like the Ephesians were hearing the feelings that go with those actions in Jesus' list.

The idea is that we can put these feelings and ways of acting away, that there is something we can do, we can pay attention to truth, that is genuine, real, caring. We can work honestly, speak openly, share, speak only that which is building up, and deliver grace. Let me just say as an aside at that, it feels like were in a world that it's so much easier to tear down, to find what's wrong, to spend so much time in the negative that we never find the way to actually do things together. Here's that invitation to move away from the tearing down, the struggles. Looking to how we can work together to build up and deliver grace. The description of this path is further described in Ephesians that one might be tender hearted, kind, and forgiving one another.

Ephesians suggests, trying to do these things, we become imitators of God. We live in love; we choose to see the value in another as one of God's children so that we truly care. Knowing the surprise gift of God's forgiving love we react with a change of heart, putting away falsehood, and learning to care for one another. You know, so much of scripture feels like it is a about this very thing, putting away the falsehoods we tell ourselves so that don't have to care for others. So much of scripture seems to be inviting us to care for one another and to think about how we live together.

So as we let this passage sit with us, I would ask you to think about your last week, think about when you experienced a moment of genuine caring, honest work, when someone exhibited that desire to use what they had to share with others, or when somebody declined to tear someone else down and instead looked for a way to build up. Where in this last week did you experience tenderheartedness, kindness, forgiveness.

As you think about that, as you notice those experiences and think about what they did for you, we're reminded that we are also those who are invited to be the ones who do those things, dependent on God's grace. How can we live our lives, showing genuine caring, doing honest work, so that we can share with those in need, lifting them up? How can we build one another up as tenderhearted, kind, forgiving, imitators of God? We're invited to recognize, to reject, and refuse to do the evils on Jesus' list. And instead, to be those who imitate God. Just one other thing about that, as we do that, I believe we demonstrate, and show, that we honor God; and we bring honor to God's family. There's a way which looking out beyond ourselves with all the ways of caring, and forgiving, being kind, also creates a community, the family of God, in a special way. And so, we are invited as we go forth this day to remember the grace we've been given and to share it. Amen.