

It Is From Within
Pentecost 15, 2018
St. Andrew's Kelowna, The Rev'd Anne Privett
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In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This last week, I set about trying cook my way through the dinner section of one of my favourite cookbooks. I wound up with food poisoning from the one meal I ate out! Between the intentional cooking and the enforced down time, I got to listen to the fantastic 2017 Massey Lectures that aired on CBC this week. Did anyone else hear them? "In Search of a Better World: a Human Rights Odyssey" was written and delivered by Payam Akhavan, a renowned professor of international law and human rights, who now teaches at McGill university and serves on the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague. The lectures are brilliant and he doesn't shy away from talking about the role of the spiritual life in the transformation of humankind. In the final part of his lecture he says: "spiritual transcendence isn't a surfeit of psycho-babble, it is an act of resistance against the oppression of our soul, an opening, a sacrificial struggle and meaningful change.... the cure a world groaning from emptiness needs most is a grass roots conspiracy of authenticity implemented by transactions of selfless beauty."¹

After spending the last 5 weeks in the Gospel of John, we are dropped into Mark's Gospel this morning and we find ourselves listening to an argument between Jesus and the Pharisees and scribes. The Pharisees, who were known as meticulous observers of the Jewish purity and ancestral laws, accuse Jesus and his disciples of being unclean and not living by the important traditions of the elders. Jesus responds essentially calling the Pharisees hypocrites and then says: "there is nothing outside a person that by going in can 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."

One of my teachers and mentors in seminary, Stephen Reynolds, looked at the list of intentions that Jesus names as evil and made the observation that each, even just in thought, "violates the love of God and pollutes the image of God that each of us is".² "Sin," then he said, "is not the evil that is *in* us, but the evil that happens *between* us. For even if we do not act on our evil intentions, we have already denied their target the dignity that God gave to that person. In doing that, we have also denied God and God's rule in our own lives; we have silently turned ...another person, another image of God, into a 'no-go area' for God."³ And that is key. There can be no part our lives where the Kingdom does not reign, where God does not rule. To try to make it so, or

¹ <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/the-2017-cbc-massey-lectures-in-search-of-a-better->

² 3 September 2000 (*Proper 22 B - Pentecost 12*): Church of the Redeemer TO 08:00, 09:30, 11:15 HE.

³ *Ibid.*

say God's dignity does not apply to another, to conveniently overlook patterns of behavior while keeping to religious tradition, is where evil takes hold, where we defile ourselves, marring the image of God in ourselves and others. As the Roman Catholic Church faces its history of clerical abuse and the Romans in Australia refuse to examine the tradition of the seal of the confessional when it comes to child abuse, this hits home quite acutely. The Letter from James this morning leaves us with a striking image for what Jesus is saying: it is as if someone looking at themselves in the mirror, chooses to turn and walk away, and in the process entirely forgets who they actually are.

So it's not first about the rules or the food or the hand-washing, it's about allowing God into every facet, every thought, every habit and pattern, living a life where there is no such thing as a 'no-go area' for God. The biblical scholar N.T. Wright puts it this way: "Jesus' basic point is that purity laws, including food laws, don't actually touch the real human problem, and that is what the kingdom of God addresses. The scriptures spoke of purity and set up signposts to it; Jesus was offering the reality. When you arrive at the destination you don't need signposts anymore, not because they were worthless but precisely because they were correct"⁴.

They were correct because they pointed to this deep longing to be with God, to be God's, to be holy. They pointed to God's ancient command in Leviticus: "You shall be holy for I the Lord your God am holy" (19:2); a command that echoed into the Gospel of Matthew as 'be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect' (5:48) and Luke as, 'be merciful as your Father is merciful' (6:35). A holiness, a perfection and a mercy that came to its fulfillment in Jesus the Christ. A fulfillment of the covenant no one saw coming in the way that it came: a perfect gift of God's own self. God came to us in human form, carried on the cross all sin, took and redeemed the ways we create 'no-go areas' of ourselves and others by taking them right to God through his very self. It was and is the ultimate act of selfless beauty. Through Christ, with Christ and in Christ our humanity is given nothing less than resurrection, the sign and reality that a new creation that has begun. A new way of being human is possible - a better world is possible - when we allow the Holy Spirit to open us and do the painful but true work that God's transforming love longs to do within each of us.

Payam Akhavan ends the 5th and final part of the Massey Lecture series by saying: "to be worthy of serving humanity we must be broken open so that Invincible Light can enter the depths of our being. Without knowledge of suffering... will never set out on that wondrous journey in search of better world."⁵

May you take the time this week to examine the intentions of your heart and offer every thought, action, and desire to the service of God's Kingdom. May you set out that on the wondrous journey today and may it be your lifetime's journey.

Amen.

⁴ Mark for Everyone, pg. 93

⁵ As above.