

"Completely Clean"

Ephesians 5:22-33

September 2, 2012

14th Sunday After Pentecost

Introduce Introit. In the 1990's, tennis star Andre Agassi did a commercial for Canon cameras which had, as it's slogan, "Image is everything!" That became the mantra for many during the 1990's and beyond. Basically stated, it means that what you look like on the outside is most important in determining your attractiveness and self-worth. In fact, according to the commercial, it's everything. As a result, many people will spend much time, effort, and money in maintaining that outward image with the right clothes, the right makeup, and the right exercise. Some people will do anything, including face lifts, tummy tucks, and other surgeries so that they will look their best. After all, image is everything!

This seems to be true in our moral lives, as well. King David, one of the most famous Old Testament characters, worked hard to maintain a good outward image. He was a young king. His monarchy was thriving. He had a young beautiful wife, named Bathsheba, and a new baby boy. His image couldn't have been better and he worked hard to maintain it!

On the inside though, it was a completely different story. His young wife was his former mistress. This adulterous affair resulted in a pregnancy which David tried to cover up by having Bathsheba's husband, Uriah the Hittite, killed in battle with the cooperation of Joab, the general of the army. David worked very hard to cover up his sin and maintain his public image. And, except for the gossip around the palace of people who had witnessed this treachery, David had been successful. Only he knew.

I'm sure all of us here have worked hard to maintain a similar public image so that we look good to those around us. We dress well, watch our weight, exercise, and so on in order to look good. We do everything we can so that people think we have loving marriages, happy families, successful careers, and morally good lives.

But what about the inside? Does it contradict our carefully crafted outer self-image? Is there an ugliness there that rivals King David? We might deny this, but author Robert Louis Stevenson once said, "Every human being has thoughts that would shock hell." We are constantly at work covering up thoughts, words, and deeds which we hope no one else will see or know about. Are these minor character flaws and inappropriate choices or is it something worse? Consider the words our text uses to describe them. The word for *transgression* indicates complete rebellion against God. *Iniquity* signifies the perversion and twisting of God's moral standards. *Sin* indicates that the divinely appointed goal set for us has been completely missed. This is pretty serious stuff. Yet we think we can handle it. We can keep it all under wraps. We can keep our public image good. No one need know except us.

Yet God knows. He knew of David's sin, even as he compounded it with more sin as he attempted to cover it up. He knows of our sin – even the sin that no one else knows. He knows of our attempts to cover up our sins by committing more sins to cover up previous sins.

Yet we think we can fix this by doing good or by avoiding evil. However, this shows a basic misunderstanding of what sin is. We think that sin is something outside of us which we can either avoid before it gets to us or change once it affects us. This is what Jesus was addressing in our Gospel reading for today. The Jewish leaders thought eating the wrong food or eating the right food without ceremonially washing your hands first would make you sinful and unclean. Jesus said that's not true. He said, "There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him."

It's not what's on the outside and goes into you that defiles you. It's what's on the inside – in your heart – that comes out of you which will defile you. What goes into you, goes into your stomach and out the other end. It never enters your heart. Jesus said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

You see the problem here? We are not just sinners (people who do wrong things). We are sinful (sinners in our very essence). You can try to avoid sin, but you can't. You can try to cover up sin but it won't work. It usually requires more sin to cover up previous sin. You can try to get rid of sin by outward actions, but that's not possible. None of us can wash away the filth and pollution because it just keeps on coming in a steady stream from the sinful nature of our hearts. We can't avoid sin because we ARE sin. Martin Luther wrote, "It is great wisdom to know that we are nothing but sin, so that we do not think of sin lightly." (p.307)

When David no longer thought of sin lightly, he wrote this psalm as a response to his great sin. "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin." This was a plea for mercy. David was tired of covering up his sin and trying to maintain a good image. Are you? Are you tired of carrying around your burden of sin and guilt, covering it up in the hope that no one, even God, notices? David simply threw himself on the mercy of God. He did not try to cover his sin any longer. He did not try to explain it, rationalize it or justify it. He admitted he couldn't do anything. Only God could take care of this problem. Drop your burdens. Lower your masks. Stop trying to cover up sin or make excuses for it. Say, with David, "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin."

David expresses confidence in the effectiveness of God's mercy. When God does something, it is effective. "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow." A hyssop plant had long hairy branches which could be used to dip in things in order to ceremonially cleanse them. In the Old Testament (Lev. 14:4ff), a hyssop plant was dipped in the blood of the sacrifice and applied seven times to a person with the deadly disease of leprosy. God declared him to be clean

In another instance (Numbers 19), hyssop was used with water. When a person had contact with a dead body, he was considered to be unclean. Yet when hyssop was dipped in water and sprinkled over the one who had contact with death, God declared him clean. In both of these

circumstances, God used a hyssop branch to convey blood and water for the cleansing of unclean people.

God has done the same for you and me. He has purged you with hyssop and you are clean. He has taken the blood of the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ, on the cross and sprinkled it upon you. You are clean. The spiritual leprosy of sin and been completely washed away. That is an accomplished fact of which Scripture testifies, “the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.” (1 John 1:7)

And if that wasn't enough, He personalized it for you. He washed you individually in Holy Baptism. The hyssop was dipped in water and sprinkled on you in accordance with the Word of God and you are clean. You who had not only been in contact with death, but were doomed to die, temporally and eternally, have been cleansed from the contamination of death and, in Holy Baptism, been given life in place of death. This is an accomplished fact of which Scripture also testifies and which we heard last week in the epistle reading from Ephesians, “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.” (Eph. 5:25-27)

That is how God sees you. It may not be how others see you or how you always feel. But God's declaration is true, whether others think it is true or whether you feel like it is true. You are clean. You are whiter than snow. For when God undertakes such a cleansing, it is, indeed, effective.

But that's not the end of the prayer. If our hearts continue to hide and cover up our sin, we will soon be back in the same predicament again. So, with David, we pray, “Create in me a new heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” We cannot reform our old self. We need a completely new self. God answers this prayer through our baptism into Christ. As Scripture says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! (2 Corinthians 5:17)

You are not only a clean person in the eyes of God. You are a completely new person in the sight of God.

This doesn't mean it will be easy. This will always be a struggle. So we pray for a right spirit – a steadfast, strong spirit within us. We do not depend on ourselves, but we draw upon the power of Jesus' resurrection from the dead for our life. Again, it goes back to our baptism where we find that strength and that power. Paul writes, "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." (Rom. 6:4)

This is serious business. Sin cuts us off from the presence of God and threatens to drive out the Holy Spirit. So we implore God, "Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me." In response to this plea, our gracious Heavenly Father invites us into His presence here in His sanctuary. He grants us His Holy Spirit which is active in His Word and powerful in His Sacrament.

David so urgently prays for a joyful heart that it indicates how seriously he had been depressed by his sin and his efforts to hide it and cover it up. If we truly recognize the depth of our sinfulness, we, too, will be depressed. Yet God grants this petition in our worship as He restores joy to us by what He has done in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ to save us and by how He has delivered His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation in various ways in our assembly. He grants us a willing spirit, enlivened by His Holy Spirit, to leave this place with the weight of the world off our shoulders and the desire to serve Him by serving our neighbor.

In the final analysis, image ISN'T everything. In God's eyes, it's nothing. Reality is everything. And the reality is that sin is not merely an outward action which we can avoid, but an inward condition which we cannot change. But God has purged us in the blood of Jesus Christ. He has washed us in the water of Holy Baptism. And we are clean. Return to your baptism and let Him create a clean heart in you every day and renew a right spirit in you always. He will not cast you away from His

presence nor take His Holy Spirit from you. Instead, He gives you joy – not in changing, often disheartening, outward circumstances – but in the unchanging eternal salvation which He has given you freely in Christ Jesus. He will give you a willing spirit and uphold you always as you live for Him in this life and with Him in the life that is to come. Amen.