



“WATCH YOUR MOUTH!”

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 15: 10-20

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

Sunday, August 20, 2023

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Matthew 15:10-20

Then Jesus called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?"

He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit."

But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.

For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

The Word of the LORD

Thanks be to God.

“Watch your mouth!”

That can mean all sorts of things, can't it?

Like when an offended and exasperated and maybe even defensive parent of a surly teenager draws a line in the sand. “Watch your mouth!” means you’ve taken it too far and your best bet is to stop talking right now.

Your mouth can get you into trouble.

“Watch your mouth!” is most often an imperative that means don’t say something you just said again or don’t say what I think you are about to say because you cannot take it back.

Watch your mouth is a warning, a threat, a stern reminder, a directive.

And we can definitely read this passage as that kind of tough talk from Jesus.

Watch your mouth! What you say can hurt people, even kill people. What you say can ruin people’s lives and reputations. What you say can break trust, break promises, break relationship.

Jesus drew the crowds to him to say it—to set the record straight, to settle a dispute, to quiet a controversy.

Like when the principle used to come on the intercom in the middle of class and say “a reminder to all students, it is against the rules to” Fill in the blank.

That’s when you knew someone was in trouble, someone had done the thing we were being reminded not to do and that’s why we are being reminded. To keep things from getting out of hand.

And this is where we need to watch our mouths when we talk about this passage. Because there’s this well-worn path of where talk about this passage goes... history and stereotypes and easy shortcuts our brains take when we have heard something time after time after time. And we then think it’s the only conclusion that makes sense.

And we make this passage something it is not—we make it a wholesale condemnation of the Law, the Torah, the sacred practices of eating kosher and observing sabbath and cleanliness. We make this passage about a rejection of Judaism instead of a very strong statement about morality and beloved community.

This passage actually says pretty much nothing about Torah. So right now I want you to hear me loud and clear! Watch YOUR mouth! And while you are at it, watch your thoughts and assumptions that often lead our mouths to say things that just are not true. Humans can be projection machines—because we like avoiding the pain of doing our own work. It’s a way of protecting ourselves from our worst fears. We all do it as a strategy for survival.

So watching out mouths can be revolutionary! A way to interrupt some old habits that may not be serving us well.

And watch your heart—your values and your aspirations. Let our words speak the truth of what we truly hold dear and sacred. Our Jewish heritage is not the problem Jesus came to address. Jesus was Jewish!

Jesus came to hold power that oppresses and harms to account. Jesus did not come to erase the Faith that formed him.

Watch your mouth! We can barely even notice when we prop up false teachings and even violent ways of thinking.

(Stuff about hand washing—was a priestly act, not something required of everyone—something required liturgically)

The Pharisees is not a term that should be equated with the Jewish faith. Jesus tangled with those in power who he saw abusing their power—whether they be religious authorities, Government authorities, or cultural authorities.

And it seems the problem he has with the Pharisees here is not the adherence to Torah they encouraged, but the misrepresentation of what's at stake in the priestly practice of hand washing. It was not an issue of morality, but a practice of humility and role.

Jesus is calling out how easily we can lose sight of what's at stake in sacred practices. And we can lose sight of where the real harm lies in our collective life.

The rules around food actually have an elegance to them—they actually did grow out of ancestral learning about health and avoiding disease and death in a world that did not have things like refrigeration, antibiotics, and Clorox wipes.

Jesus does not say one word about those practices being a problem here. He says the practice of hand washing does not determine your moral status.

One could make an argument that there is a brief suggestion to the same effect about what you eat, too, but confusion about what's at stake with hand washing seems to be the focus here.

The parallel passage in the Gospel of Mark is more pointed about what we eat. And we can explore that together someday too!

But today, let's work together to be more careful with what comes out of our mouths. And let's spend our energy where Jesus is calling us to spend it.

On the power of our words to do harm. And on the ways we can try and avoid accountability by judging people based on things that really have nothing to do with their moral status in God's eyes.

To put a contemporary spin on it—the way sexuality gets weaponized by the far right political machine to create fervor around drag shows and books about families with same gender parents while they pass laws that suppress the ability of Black and Brown people to vote.

All the while they get away with creating murderous conditions for the human race. They create and entrench danger for LGBTQIA+ folks and they create and further entrench danger for Black and Brown people. All the while the moral implications of such abuse of power get lost in the smoke and mirrors of false alarms.

What if we could get better at realizing who should be watching their mouths and who should be washing their hands? And what's at stake in both.

What if we could better recognize murderous and dangerous speech when we hear it, and even better yet, when we say it!

What if we could better recognize the murderous implications of what we don't say—this is one especially for people in white bodies. How much do we mistake avoidance for virtue and how much is silence complicity?

"For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

Watch your mouth! And pay attention to what is coming out of your mouth and why. Pay attention to what is not coming out of your mouth and why.

We can speak our truth without diminishing other people in the process. Holding people accountable does not mean taking them down a peg, it means honoring their humanity. And we cannot be co-conspirators in the work of mutual liberation and stay silent when white supremacy is being shored up and retooled right in front of our eyes.

Accountability is an act of love. But when it is not done with love, it can quickly become the opposite of accountability. It can become accusation, it can become anxiety driven attempts

to discredit the person needing the accountability. It can become gossip, it can become slander, it can become mean spirited.

Watch your mouth! And notice what comes out when we are anxious, angry, afraid, or insecure. When we are prone to looking for the quick release of pressure instead of the slower more uncomfortable work of intentional discernment in these times. The slower work of healing the human family.

And then watch your mouth when you are grounded, prayerful, and compassionate.

It is much harder to dehumanize someone when we come from a deep and abiding belief in our own belovedness.

Then “watch your mouth” becomes an invitation—behold, the power of the human mouth to build beautiful and strong things—like trust that is truly trustworthy, like right relationship, like truth that sets us all free, like courage to put a stop to the habits that harm us over and over again.

This is not to be mixed up with only saying things that are nice. Nice might taste good temporarily, but it is not the nourishment that will sustain the work of liberation.

Our work together around mutual liberation is really all about watching our mouths—but not in the scolding, withering kind of way a parent might with a surly teenager. And not in the silencing kind of way that happens when we are afraid we might mess up or that we might be uncomfortable.

But with an acknowledgment of the power we each possess and the potency of joining forces with the power of truth pouring out from our collective voice—to interrupt the ways words have built and maintained the architecture of supremacy and oppression.

Our words can also be powerful tools in taking apart that architecture and building a better world.

That’s when “watch your mouth” moves from condemnation to inspiration.

Thanks be to God.