

“Defiled and Undefiled”

James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23; Isaiah 59:1-15

Isaiah 59:1-15

¹See, the LORD’s hand is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. ²Rather, your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear. ³For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, your tongue mutters wickedness.

⁴No one brings suit justly, no one goes to law honestly; they rely on empty pleas, they speak lies, conceiving mischief and begetting iniquity...

Their works are works of iniquity, and deeds of violence are in their hands.

⁷Their feet run to evil, and they rush to shed innocent blood; their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity, desolation and destruction are in their highways.

⁸The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths. Their roads they have made crooked; no one who walks in them knows peace.

⁹Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us; we wait for light, and lo! there is darkness; and for brightness, but we walk in gloom.

¹⁰We grope like the blind along a wall, groping like those who have no eyes; we stumble at noon as in the twilight, among the vigorous as though we were dead.

¹¹We all growl like bears;

like doves we moan mournfully.
We wait for justice, but there is none;
for salvation, but it is far from us.

¹²For our transgressions before you are many,
and our sins testify against us.
Our transgressions indeed are with us,
and we know our iniquities:
¹³transgressing, and denying the Lord,
and turning away from following our God,
talking oppression and revolt,
conceiving lying words and uttering them from the heart.
¹⁴Justice is turned back,
and righteousness stands at a distance;
for truth stumbles in the public square,
and uprightness cannot enter.
¹⁵Truth is lacking,
and whoever turns from evil is despoiled.

The LORD saw it,
and it displeased him that there was no justice.

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

¹Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, ²they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them.

³(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.)

⁵So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him,
“Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition

of the elders,
but eat with defiled hands?”

⁶He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

‘This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;

⁷in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

⁸You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

¹⁴Then he called the crowd again and said to them,

“Listen to me, all of you, and understand:

¹⁵there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile,
but the things that come out are what defile...

²¹For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come:
fornication, theft, murder, ²²adultery,
avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness,
envy, slander, pride, reckless foolishness¹.

²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

James 1:17-27

¹⁷Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above,
coming down from the Father of lights,

with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

¹⁸In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth
by the word of truth,

so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

¹⁹You must understand this, my beloved:

let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger;

²⁰for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.

²¹Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness
and rank growth of wickedness,
and welcome with meekness the implanted word
that has the power to save your souls.

²²But be doers of the word,
and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.

²³For if any are hearers of the word and not doers,
they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror;
²⁴for they look at themselves and, on going away,
immediately forget what they were like.

²⁵But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty,
and persevere,
being not hearers who forget but doers who act—
they will be blessed in their doing.

²⁶If any think they are religious,
and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts,
their religion is worthless.

²⁷Religion that is pure
and undefiled before God, the Father, is this:
to care for orphans and widows in their distress,
and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

The Sermon

Under the protective care of a museum in Honolulu is a wax cylinder from the first, experimental generation of recording equipment produced by Thomas Edison.

It's old and so delicate that if anyone tried to play it today, it would disintegrate, which would be a historical travesty because on it is the voice of David Kalakaua, better known as the last King of Hawai'i.ⁱⁱ

As it is, the sound on that recording has not been heard in decades, but fortunately someone wrote down what the ex-king of an ex-kingdom said on his deathbed in San Francisco in 1891.

Some years after he had been removed from office at bayonet point
and sent into exile,
and knowing he was near the end of his life,
when someone asked if he would like to leave a recorded message
on Edison's sound equipment, he said yes.

They brought in the recording equipment,
set it up in his hotel room, started the recording,
and the deposed king simply said, in Hawaiian:

“Tell them that I tried.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Somehow it seems weirdly fitting that that last message to his people, to the world, to posterity, is theoretically preserved, but you can't actually listen to it or hear it.

We know, or at least we are told, the simple and breathtakingly brief content of the message;

but *we can't hear the voice*, even though—again, theoretically—it is preserved, right there, physically “on” and conceptually “in” that unplayable, 125-year-old wax cylinder.

Sometimes it feels like we've got the Word of God,
with its millennia of testimonies about God's presence,
and the activity of the Spirit,
and the teachings and healings

and life and death and resurrection of Jesus;

but sometimes it feels a little like it's encapsulated on that wax disc, which is so delicate that if you tried to play it, it would just disintegrate and then be lost forever.

I know it's real;

but what I really want more than anything
is to hear it spoken in the genuine voice of Jesus—
even though, like King Kalakaua,
he would be speaking a language I don't understand.

But in the same way, just as I know,
or am told by a translator who wrote it down,
what the last king of Hawai'i said,

I also know,
or am told by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John
and their legions of translators,
what Jesus said.

I know what he said, but I want to hear his voice. I want to know the inflections. I want to watch his mouth and his eyes and his hands while he speaks; I want to know if he was the kind of person who puts a hand on your forearm when he talks to you, or if his eyes seem to drill into your soul the way charismatic people seem to do when they talk to you.

In a world full of deception and distortion and outright lies,

I feel like even though I know what the Bible says,

I crave that genuine experience;

“I want Jesus to walk with me”

as literally as that song title suggests;

I need something authentic,

and I long to hear it from Jesus himself,

especially with so many uncertainties,

so much deliberate misleading.

I just heard a Voltaire quote that I had never picked up on before:
“Those who can make you believe absurdities
can make you commit atrocities.”^{iv}

When absurdities are sold as fact
and bought into by whole populations,
the atrocities are never too far behind:
in the Spanish Inquisition or the Salem Witch Trials,
in Nazi Germany or Taliban Afghanistan,
Rwanda or Yugoslavia in the 1990s
or a hundred places in the world right now.

And so it would be more than understandable if any of the disciples, or
especially Jesus himself, would be more than a little bit frustrated,

when they’re on a mission of bringing hope and healing
and fundamental teaching about who God is and what God wants—
a mission that ought to have people singing in the streets,
especially the religious people
whom you would hope would “get it”
at a deeper level than anybody
about how amazingly good this good news is;

and instead they get the top religious authorities and the most learned
people picking up on picayune, trivial matters like,
“How come your followers buck the holy tradition by not doing the
ritual washing before they take their food?”

As if that were what’s at stake;
as if that was the extent of the radical reordering of the world
that the advent of Jesus Christ signifies.

I almost expect to hear Jesus say, “Seriously? We’re on the verge of
redefining the meaning of the universe for humankind,
and bringing the kingdom of heaven to earth,

and *that's* what's caught your attention?

“We are about something much deeper, infinitely more profound and immeasurably more *real* than these religious purity practices.

“You're talking about food that goes into a disciple's mouth, or anyone else's, defiling that person if it's not ritually prepared the right way.

“I'm saying that if you want to talk about what's defiled, let's talk about what I hear coming *out* of people's mouths.”

Years ago I was with some people I knew, and somebody was telling a story about having been in a hotel lobby or a diner or something—some place that was informal, not a sit-down restaurant but a place where there was some measure of food service involved.

One of the people had ordered an iced tea, and when it was delivered, along with everybody else's water or soft drinks or whatever, nobody had any ice; there was no ice in the iced tea. Which would seem like a fairly reasonable expectation, given that the word “iced” is actually in the name of the beverage.

Anyway, after some incomprehension and a circular conversation in which they were asking for ice for everybody's glasses, the culmination of the story was that the attendant went over to an ice machine, grabbed a bunch of ice between two hands—no gloves or anything—and brought it over to the table where they were sitting and sort of funneled the ice from her hands into people's drinking glasses.

Obviously, that's the kind of thing that anybody would look at and go, well, something's not quite right with that server, for one thing;

and for another, I am absolutely not going to be drinking that iced tea, after that server—I mean, who knows where her hands may have been, or how long since she had washed them? That iced tea, which now

actually has ice in it, is defiled by its contact with those unwashed, unsanitary hands. Who would drink *that*?

There's one other piece of that story, though, which is that although I don't remember who was telling it or where it took place or any other details about it, I do remember the entirely irrelevant fact of having been told the racial identity of the server.

And I can't help but think that—and I participated in this by not picking up on it at the time—

The fact that the person telling me this story
thought it was important enough to tell me the server's race
suggests to me that—
and I'm just saying subconsciously, not even intentionally—

I wonder if it wasn't so much, "I don't want that person putting ice in my cup with their bare hands,"

as maybe—and again, maybe just subconsciously—"I don't want that person putting ice in my cup with their *black* hands."

Again, maybe not. But for some reason, they had gone out of their way to tell me the race of that person when they told me the story—a totally irrelevant piece of information—and at the time, I didn't think to question or even remotely wonder why.

And I feel like I can hear that voice of Jesus asking me:
is it what goes into a person's mouth that defiles,
or is it what comes out of our mouth,
which proceeds directly from the heart,
that defiles?

I want to see that clearly.

I want my religion to be one that follows Jesus into the world where the Word of God is already at work doing astonishing things.

I want the purity of my religion to come
not from knowing I'm getting the details of the practices just right—
practices that may have had some symbolic value at some point
but don't have much to do with loving God with all my heart, soul,
mind and strength, or my neighbor as myself.

I want the purity of my religion to come from my total surrender
to the way God is working righteousness in the world,
sometimes in spite of my best efforts
and those of all of us who seem to be addicted
to trying to harness God's power
to do what we, in our genius,
have figured out for ourselves what God needs to do.

“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this,” says James:
“to care for orphans and widows in their distress,
and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

I noticed something funny this summer while I was with my Doctoral class of about 15 people in New York City, and we had a video link to someone who was talking to us from California. We were in a meeting room around a long conference table, and the video link was being projected on the wall at one end of the long table. She could see us and we could see her, so everybody kind of turned their chairs to face that direction and class members were asking her questions and interacting with her.

At one point, there was some technical glitch and the video went completely blank, but the link was still good, so even though there was no visual, it was just like being on a speakerphone, and we carried on with our conversation.

What I noticed was that as we took turns speaking with her and asking questions, whoever was interacting with her would look intently at that blank spot on the wall, talking and gesturing as if she could see us and we could see her. She couldn't and we couldn't, but somehow it just felt natural to keep trying to communicate the same way that had worked so well for the first part of the conversation.

When the Pharisees were so accustomed to living their religion
in a way that didn't have much to do
with anything worth living and dying for,
but focused on the ritual washing of hands and cups
and pots and brass kettles,
it was not entirely unlike that room full of scholars
continuing to interact with a blank wall
as if the wall itself was where the voice was coming from,
and as if the woman were right there talking from the wall
and could see us talking and gesturing.

It sounds like Jesus is saying to the religious people around him:
those pots and kettles are not where the voice of God is coming from.
The point is not to serve them and obey all the associated rules.

We're talking about what's in your heart; and in those days, the "heart" meant not just emotional responses that you couldn't control but also your own *will*. Biblically speaking, love is a matter of will which is beyond simply how you feel about somebody or something.

We have a faith that keeps us grounded at the same time that it longs to set us free, free to go into the world and do things for real.

In a world that desperately needs us to be for real,
that is relying, counting on us to tell what we know
about God's love for everyone,

I want my religion to be undefiled:

not the one where I can show off
how I did all the incidentals without flaw,
but the kind where human lives are different and better
because my mind and body and spirit were put to God's use.

At the very least, when I am asked for a summation
of the life I have led as a follower of Jesus,
for whatever scribe or time capsule is standing by
to receive my words,
I want to be able to say with all the disciples,
“Tell them that I tried.”

Postscript/Erratum

Immediately following the service in which this sermon was delivered, the person running our sound system that day—Heather Scott, an excellent theologian in her own right—said she was sorry to have to tell me that those were, in fact, not the words of King David Kalakaua. Alas, the podcast from which I gleaned that story had not done adequate research—and neither did their source, and neither did I. I sincerely apologize. (And it had seemed like such a great illustration!)

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ⁱ “Reckless foolishness” is my interpretative translation of ἀφροσύνη which the NRSV bafflingly translates into an English word, “folly,” that by 1990 nobody had used in years.

ⁱⁱ “The Original Most Interesting Man in the World.” Endless Thread (podcast), WBUR and Reddit, August 9, 2018. **But see my postscript/erratum, and note iii. below. Endless Thread, Reddit, and I all failed to do adequate research!**

ⁱⁱⁱ Alas, alas: this appears to be the work of a novelist in the early 1950's, and these are not actually the words of David Kalakaua. Thanks to Heather Scott for pointing out the fallacy to me after the service, and for sending me a link to this article: David Thompson, "Kalakaua's Famous Last Words? We Thought We Knew Kalakaua's Deathbed Words. We Were Wrong" in Honolulu Magazine, February 27, 2013. (The article includes the information that Kalakaua was the founder of that very magazine. Even they, I am somewhat relieved to report, had fallen for the same story I did in an article they had published in November 2012, after which a reader pointed out to them the historical discrepancy.)

^{iv} In Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, epigraph of Ch. 4 (New York: Penguin, 2011), 129