

DATE: August 31, 2003

SUNDAY: Ordinary 22

SERMON: Pure Religion

TEXTS: James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-23

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One of the signs of the times we live in appeared in the *Times Record* this past Thursday; you may have seen it. It was a short article on page 6 about a lawsuit involving the Oakhurst Dairy of Portland and the Monsanto Corporation—the agro-chemical giant. It seems that Monsanto is suing the Oakhurst dairy, which is a relatively small, local firm, for promoting its milk as hormone-free, thus implying that milk produced by cows which are being given Monsanto hormones is inferior, and such advertising is giving them an unfair advantage. Things are getting weird when a company can sue you for letting people know that you're not using its products.

The debate over hormones given to cows or chickens or other livestock and whether we ought to eat grains or vegetables or fruits that have been genetically modified is one of the hot issues of our times. It's one of the dividing lines between Europe and America right now, other than American foreign policy. It's a controversy that in some respects represents genuine and deeply-held convictions on both sides, and in other respects is a manufactured controversy by giant agribusiness companies on both sides of the Atlantic as well as by a lot of very ill-informed media-hype. The end result is that the European Union bans the import of any genetically-modified food or seed. Europeans have an almost fanatical concern with the purity of their food, and tend, rightly or wrongly to view Americans as people more concerned with convenience and profitability than they are with pure and wholesome food.

But concern for purity in our food supply is not only a European concern; go into Hannafords or Shaws or Morning Glory sometime and do a count of how many times the word "pure" appears on the labels of everything from olive oil to shampoo to peanut butter. Remember the old slogan for Ivory

soap? "Ninety-nine and forty-four one hundredths percent pure." I guess that's about as close to perfect purity as it's possible to get with soap. Just within the past few years, there's been a whole marketing approach with certain shampoos and other products produced without any coloring added—they're clear like water—making the equation in customers' minds of clarity with purity.

Our concern for purity is normally related to our concerns about health. We want things pure because what is pure is healthy; it doesn't cause us to get sick or break out in hives or have to think about the unpleasantness that necessarily lies behind much of our food production.

But our concept of purity doesn't usually extend to religion. We're not accustomed to speaking of "pure religion" or "impure religion," are we? Those are two words we don't normally associate with one another. Religion is religion. It may contain truth or falsehood; it may be organized or informal, it may be ritualistic or mystical or charismatic. But pure religion? What does that mean? And yet that's precisely the phrase the author of the epistle of James uses in our lesson today.

Does it mean that Presbyterians are better than Methodists? That Muslims are better than Hindus? Does it mean orthodox or doctrinally-correct rather than unorthodox or heretical? In the case of religion, does pure mean simple or unsophisticated? Is a simple nature religion purer than a religion where people go to churches with professional clergy and a structured liturgy? Is pure religion the sort some people sing about when they sing "Gimme that old-time religion?" "It was good for my mother, it was good for my father, it was good for my brother, and it's good enough for me." Is that pure religion?

None of these things appears to be in the mind of our author when he speaks about Apure religion.® The Epistle of James is probably the most eminently pragmatic and practical writing in the New Testament. The writer does not concern himself unduly over

doctrinal matters except to say that the best doctrine in the world is worthless if it doesn't produce tangible results that are good. In fact, Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, wanted to exclude this epistle from the New Testament because it says so little about what Luther considered the indispensable doctrine of the Christian faith—the truth that we are justified before God only by grace, through faith rather than by our own merits. Luther called it an epistle of straw. To him, James was preaching a gospel of salvation by good works, so he rejected it. (Interesting that 500 years on, the Roman Catholics and the Lutherans have come to agreement on their understanding of the doctrine of justification by grace, implying that the whole flap back in the 16th century was a misunderstanding.)

Well, Luther, like the rest of us, had his blind spots, and his view on this epistle was one of them. James isn't talking about things we do that earn us God's approval, and therefore a place among the saved. He's talking about the shape that God's gracious and redeeming work takes in our lives and in the life of the community of faith. He's talking about what saving faith produces in us; not what we produce in order to be saved. In other words, he's talking to people who are already Christians.

Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. . . rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness. . . be doers of the word and not hearers only. . . If any think they are religious and do not put a bridle on their tongues, but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. . . Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Pure religion is religion that produces certain results in individual lives and in the community of faith. Pure religion is religion that builds relationships rather than destroying them. Pure religion doesn't manifest itself in sordid behavior or slanderous gossip, in backbiting or contentiousness; or lying; it seeks

truth in speech and action. Pure religion is characterized by ruthless honesty about one's own motives and behavior; it doesn't deceive oneself about the state of one's heart. Pure religion reaches out and cares for the marginalized and the downtrodden and the forgotten—the outsiders,— it does not lock itself inside the doors of the church or of the heart and become self-centered and complacent. Dare I say that pure religion is the sort that talks to newcomers at coffee hour after church and makes them feel welcomed and included.

If James stresses that the purity of our religion is revealed by the tangible results it produces in our lives and in society, our gospel lesson examines the roots of those results—the hidden springs from which pure religion flows.

The stage is set by the Pharisees' question to Jesus about why his disciples eat without washing their hands. We might ask the same question, but we would ask it for very different reasons. For us it would be a matter of health or sanitation; we don't view hand-washing as a religious act. For the Pharisees, however, it was a religious issue, a matter of spiritual purity and pollution. Much of their notion of purity and impurity revolved around the conviction that they alone were God's chosen people, and everyone else in the world was not. This central conviction was the great barrier between Jew and Gentile. And since the world is as it is, one must necessarily do business with the Gentiles in the marketplace in order to survive. But when you come home for lunch, you have to wash off the spiritual defilement you've accumulated by handling things that Gentiles handled. They are a source of pollution, and so you have to ritually cleanse yourself of the pollution you had picked up from them. Sounds not far from the old practice of segregation in our own country, doesn't it? Why have separate toilets, separate water fountains, separate seating areas on a bus for whites and blacks, if not for some misguided notions of purity and pollution? Who or what group in our day is considered the source of pollution for many people? AIDS victims or those who are HIV positive,

homeless street people, perhaps? If the right-wing radio talk show hosts are to be believed, the polluters, the defilers, are homosexuals and immigrants especially immigrants from Asia and Africa and Latin America.

Jesus scathing reply to the Pharisees' question goes (literally) to the heart of the matter. Purity or impurity,, he says, is a matter of the heart. Pure actions spring from pure motives. It is not dirt on the hands incurred from contact with dirty objects or with those considered impure people that makes a person impure before God; outer dirt does not contaminate, inner dirt does, even, as in this case, when it passes under the name of religious behavior.

Jesus cites as evidence of this, his opponents' hypocritical misuse of the law of Corban. The fifth commandment in the Ten Commandments is *Honor your father and mother,* which had always been understood as a command to, among other things, provide for the care of one's elderly parents. You had to set aside a certain part of your crops or your livestock for your parents when they were too old to farm for themselves. In an agricultural, tribal society like ancient Israel was, such a law made perfect sense. It was the equivalent of the modern social security system. It was a humane law.

But there was another law, also good in its intent, which said that when you brought your offering of money or produce or livestock to the temple to dedicate it to God, you couldn't then use it for something else. All you had to do was say "Corban," which is Aramaic for "dedicated," and that was that. That money or those goods were no longer for other use. That's certainly understandable. None of us, after putting a check in the offering plate on Sunday would then go to the church office afterward and ask the treasurer to give our money back so that we could use it to buy a new shirt or a new dress instead. What kind of offering to God would that be?

But that's precisely how the law of Corban was being misused. Those whose motives were selfish, saw a way to make these

two laws work to their own advantage. If they wanted to avoid their responsibility to their elderly relatives, they simply told them, "Sorry Mom and Dad, but I can't help you with your rent this month, because I dedicated the money designated for your rent to God. So what's God's is God's and it can't be touched for anything else." Of course, since God wasn't in a big hurry for it, it could be borrowed, as it were, from God for awhile to use as collateral on purchasing a new house or to earn interest or whatever. It was a nice little scam. Meanwhile, the elderly parents went begging.

"You hypocrites," Jesus replied to his questioners, *"you have a fine way of ignoring God's laws when it suits your own convenience. You care more about the dirt on my disciples' hands than you do about the dirt of greed and self-interest in your own hearts. For it is from the heart that evil intentions come, and these are what defile a person."*

If our lesson last week helped us understand that there is a collective dimension of evil that is more than simply the sum of individual evil intentions and decisions, our lessons today remind us that evil is *not less than* those individual motives and acts. The larger, cosmic, demonic and monstrous evil that we have seen in the barbarism and butchery in Rwanda or Sierra Leone or Bosnia or the bureaucratic apparatus that produced the efficient slaughter in the gas chambers of Auschwitz or the killing fields of Cambodia didn't come from some external force of evil outside the world. The origins of cosmic, demonic evil are inside us. Inside our hearts, inside where we harbor those petty grudges, those smoldering resentments, those raging angers, those terrifying fears, those irrational prejudices, the insatiable greed for more, *B* this is where the cosmic dimension of evil has its source. The human heart is the fountain of both the purest streams of love and the foulest springs of pollution. And from little springs, greater rivers grow. And when they grow, they take on a life of their own that is bigger than the sum of the individual trickles that gave them birth.

A few years ago, Carol and I went to see the movie *The Wisdom of Crocodiles*. It was rather bizarre, but in a good sense. It was very Hitchcock-ian in the way it was made, and very effectively done. It's the story of a serial killer who actually is a very complex character. He is capable, not only of horrific acts of depraved violence, but also of acts of genuine altruism and affection. Played off against him, is the cop who suspects him of the grisly crimes he has committed. This detective, who has seen just about all the depths of human depravity that it's possible to see, in one scene, is shown undergoing Christian baptism. When asked why he is doing this, he reluctantly, and with some self-consciousness, but also with genuine conviction, speaks about his conversion. He evidently believes and hopes that his baptism and the choices and practices that follow from it will reshape and reform his life in a new direction. Near the end of the film, the cop tells the murderer that he's no longer a suspect, because he's discovered that the murderer saved the life of a woman whom we, the viewers know that he later killed in a horrible manner. Not likely that a murderer would save the life of his victim, is it, asks the cop. Oh, the killer replies, that doesn't follow at all. That's what people would like to believe. They want to think that people are all good or all bad. If a person does very bad things, then label them evil, and either lock them up or destroy them, and then the evil will be gone. But good and evil are more complex than that; someone can do really terrible things, but also be capable of good too. It's not as simple as people want to believe. The cop agrees, because he knows the complexities of his own heart, his capacity for both pure and impure motives and the results that spring from both.

As Carol and I talked about it later, we agreed that one of the messages in the film was that the difference between the cop and the serial killer was not that one of them was totally evil and the other totally good. The difference is in what they did or didn't do to purify their hearts. The cop, by his choice to be

baptized, was opening his life to the power of God's grace to purify his heart and shape and mold him into a truly human being rather than place himself under the power of his baser motives and selfish desires that would ultimately turn him into a crocodile.

It is to learn how to allow our hearts to be purified by grace that we come, week after week, to acknowledge that God is God, and that we are his creatures, to hear God's word, *The implanted word, that has the power to save your souls,* as James puts it, to be nourished by the sacraments that feed our souls when we receive them with faith, ridding ourselves of the polluting angers and fears and resentments and greed and pride that produce all the evils against which we must struggle. Here in community with one another, we learn new habits of love, of altruism, of care for the weak and the marginalized; we learn, in short, to become human beings rather than crocodiles. We come to learn, as St. Athanasius put it so unforgettably, that *The true glory of God is a human being, fully alive.*