

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 17
Year B

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9
Psalm 15
James 1:17-27
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

What is sin? According to the Catechism in our Book of Common Prayer, “sin is the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation.” In our readings today, we look at how writers of old interpreted this concept of sin.

In the reading from Deuteronomy, Moses is reminding the people of Israel of God’s commandments. Beyond the inherent benefits of following God’s commandments and, thereby, being in the center of God’s will, the Israelites were promised a new land to make their own - if they follow these instructions. They are to teach them to their children and grandchildren so future generations might also receive the benefits of following God’s will. Moses also instructs them to neither add to nor detract from these commandments.

Perhaps this is the core of what Jesus is saying to the scribes and Pharisees. They are questioning why Jesus’ disciples do not follow the traditions of the elders by not washing their hands before eating. According to the Mosaic Law, the only mention of washing hands is related to the priests washing before the sacrifice. There is never any mention of the average person needing to wash their hands under any circumstances. However, the practice was expanded to all people by tradition, not law. But the Pharisees wanted everyone to follow their tradition so condemned anyone who deviated from it.

Jesus takes this opportunity to expand on what is sinful, what defiles. As with other areas of life, what one could not eat had also expanded. While much of the prohibitions make sense to us given the methods of food storage and sanitation available to first century citizens, much of what was deemed unclean had no basis in the Law of Moses. Jesus uses this to show how man had implemented restrictions beyond the scope of God’s will. He points out that the core of sin is not what we eat but what dwells in our hearts.

If we look at this list of sins in our reading, none of them comes from outside the body. They are all conceived from within, with evil intentions. Thought is the father of sin, not appetite. We think the sin before we commit it. Jesus accuses the Pharisees of looking at the wrong things when trying to discern what might keep us from the will of God. As Jesus points out, it is not what comes into the body, either through what we eat or what we read - what enters through the mouth or the eyes - that obstructs our relationship with God. It is our thoughts.

Perhaps the key to the list in Mark’s Gospel can be found in two words - avarice and pride. The Greek word translated as avarice literally means “a desire for more.” In Luke’s Gospel, this word appears when Jesus tells us to be on guard against greed, for one’s life does not consist in the

abundance of possessions. Pride is another word for arrogance. This appears in our resistance to doing God's will as well as holding others in contempt. We might not be guilty of the other sins on Mark's list, but pride and greed often hit a little closer to home. Humility, according to the Letter of Peter, is the source of peace from God, while pride and greed is in opposition to the will of God.

As we examine ourselves in the confession, let us not forget that anything that keeps us from doing the will of God, that causes us to focus on our own will, might be something to confess. Nothing should detract from our relationship with God, our neighbor, or creation.