



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, *Chief of Parish Ministries*

Formation, with Awareness

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, August 30, 2015
The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23*

This week, someone sent me an essay on Episcopalians by Garrison Keillor, who himself attends an Episcopal Church in St. Paul, Minnesota. I'd like to share with you these excerpts:

Nobody sings like Episcopalians ... If you were to ask an audience in Des Moines, a relatively Episcopalianless place, to sing along on the chorus of "Michael Row the Boat Ashore," they will look daggers at you as if you had asked them to strip to their underwear. But if you do this among Episcopalians, they'd smile and row that boat ashore and up on the beach! ...And down the road!

Many Episcopalians are bred from childhood to sing in four-part harmony, a talent that comes from sitting on the lap of someone singing alto or tenor or bass and hearing the harmonic intervals by putting your little head against that person's rib cage. It's natural for Episcopalians to sing in harmony. We are too modest to be soloists, too worldly to sing in unison.

When you're singing in the key of C and you slide into the A7th and D7th chords, all two hundred of you, it's an emotionally fulfilling moment. By our joining in harmony, we somehow promise that we will not forsake each other.

Episcopalians, who love to sing in four-part harmony are the sort of people you could call up when you're in deep distress. If you are dying, they will comfort you. If you are lonely, they'll talk to you. And if you are hungry, they'll give you tuna salad!

Episcopalians believe in miracles and even expect miracles, especially during their stewardship programs or when passing the plate. Episcopalians feel that applauding for their children's choirs will not make the kids too proud and conceited. [1]

When I received this essay, I was in fact at St. Bart's Chorister Camp, with 14 of our Choristers and several of their fearless leaders. Chorister Camp is an annual week away in a beautiful Connecticut setting. I got to be with our Choristers for part of the time. Next year: better planning.

We were at Incarnation Camp—a sprawling 700+ acres, lots of trees, with a pristine lake for swimming, kayaking, and my personal favorite: jumping off a cliff into the lake. There is also a giant water slide, which I keep missing, but I live in hope. There is a farm with donkeys, llamas, goats, and sheep to pet. There is a ropes course. There is camp food. There are bugs. There is no air conditioning. There was a glorious almost-full moon.

Our Choristers enjoy lake time and a bit of play time each day. But they spend much of their time learning and practicing music for this coming year. I loved listening to their practicing, and I love hearing the fruits of their practice. At night they sang Compline in the open-air chapel by the lake, their singing echoing off the hill across the lake.

It was in this environment of camp, where things are laid back and close to nature with, shall we say, more relaxed

standards about cleanliness, that I studied our texts for today Pharisees and some of the scribes criticize Jesus because some of his disciples are eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing their hands.

The Pharisees weren't concerned with actual cleanliness, because people of Jesus' time had no knowledge of germs. Pasteur will not discover germs for another 1600 years or so. The Pharisees were concerned with ritual cleanliness, which is to say, purity. They were concerned about it for a good reason: Pharisees wanted to sanctify all of life. Ritual cleansing—of hands, of bodies, of cooking utensils—this setting apart, making holy each aspect of life, was to remind them they were God's people. Which is not a bad thing in itself. But as Jesus says pointedly, they've allowed their human rules to supersede or obscure God's commandments.

Any purity system—and we have them, too—is a way of defining who is in and who is out. The Pharisees are really asking: Are you and your disciples loyal to the God of Israel or not? That's an important question, given that Israel is living under Roman rule, and that various conflicting Israelite groups have a range of loyalties.

Jesus responds to the Pharisees, differentiating between what's done outwardly and what is actually in one's heart. How often we judge someone's action without knowing, or bothering to find out, what's in the heart.

Jesus addresses the crowd: "There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."

And Jesus then addresses his disciples: "For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come ... [the list that we all know so well, from our own experiences]. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person." Defile, meaning "make separate."

It seems to me there is a direct relationship between the outside things we take into ourselves and what is within us, the state of our own heart. "Heart" as used here (as in Jesus' time) being not just the seat of emotions but also the seat of knowledge and will and agency: our very being.

Think about what we take into ourselves. We might think first of food. Do we eat healthy, organic fruits and vegetables? Junk food? Think of news. Now we can ingest news 24/7. Then there's social media. And YouTube. When we watch one YouTube video, more are automatically suggested for us. Looking up one thing on the Internet leads to another and another and another. Hours later we can wonder, "How did we get here?" We can binge-watch. How much time do we spend checking and answering email?

Then there are emotions. Recent research has shown we catch them from each other, like viruses and colds. If one person is calm, that spreads. If one person is anxious, that spreads. Think about your bus and subway rides. It can feel toxic to be around a chronically angry person.

There are relationships, people we interact with often. We might ask: Is this relationship building me up or wearing me down?

I believe any person with addiction would say that what s/he ingests—what s/he takes in from the outside—can indeed defile. It can separate. It has a profound effect on heart, on body, and on mind and soul.

At the end of the day, we may ask ourselves: What have I taken in? What is the effect on me? Has this changed me for good or ill? I ask myself that, and sometimes I do not like the answers.

There's also the other side of that coin: The practices we engage in can change us in positive ways, can help us grow into more mature people, more mature Christians. (Note: mature, not perfect.)

The Church recognizes this. Those of you who have been in the Church a long time may remember the term "Christian Education." Now we use the term "Christian Formation," recognizing that all we do—classes, retreat, meditation, serving others, worship—forms us.

What we read, what we learn, how we choose to spend our time shapes us and forms us. Exercise, too. Our Team St. Bart's is riding many loops of Central Park, training for their Boston-NYC ride in late September. They are being formed.

Meditation practices really do shape and form us. Neurological studies have shown these actually change our brain. Studies have shown that monks chanting the psalms together multiple times a day come to have the same heart rate and blood pressure.

Coming to church, being part of this or another church community, shapes us. It forms us. As we enter into its rhythms of worship, of singing together (Augustine: “One who sings, prays twice.”), of serving others beyond ourselves, of receiving this bread and wine made holy, we are shaped. Over time, as we do this together week after week, year after year, we are changed, shaped, formed.

Here’s what else I experienced at Chorister Camp: kids having fun, teasing each other, being kids. I saw kids supporting each other. There were no cliques, no in/out. At the Talent Show, Chorister Camp’s grand finale on the last night, everyone was encouraged but not pressured; everyone was applauded. The kids did this themselves, not instructed by their leaders. The teamwork inherent in singing was also practiced with campfire building—finding sticks, blowing on them to get it started, dealing with clouds of smoke ... Negotiating skills were learned. I’ve just cooked two marshmallows but only want to eat one, and I need a cracker. What to do with this other one? Find someone who has two crackers and no marshmallow. OK.

The kids carried each other’s suitcases and bags and backpacks without being told to, the older, stronger ones carrying the larger, heavier bags for the younger ones. To such a degree it took us a while to sort out all the luggage on our return. They were literally carrying each other’s burdens.

What the Choristers learned and absorbed at Chorister Camp was good for their hearts and souls and minds and bodies. It will shape them in the days and weeks and years to come. What we are learning and absorbing and practicing here is good for our hearts and souls and minds and bodies. It will shape us in the days and weeks and years to come.

As one person has put it: “Our souls are relentless consumers, imprinted and formed by everything to which they are exposed.” [1]

Another friend sent me this week a beautiful essay that appeared in the New York Times recently. It’s by Oliver Sacks, the neurologist and author, who died in the early hours of this morning. In this essay, his last, Dr. Sacks wrote eloquently about his family’s observance of Sabbath, realizing the imprint he still carried of it 70-80 years later. His essay ended this way:

And now, weak, short of breath, my once-firm muscles melted away by cancer, I find my thoughts, increasingly, not on the supernatural or spiritual, but on what is meant by living a good and worthwhile life—achieving a sense of peace within oneself. I find my thoughts drifting to the Sabbath, the day of rest, the seventh day of the week, and perhaps the seventh day of one’s life as well, when one can feel that one’s work is done, and one may, in good conscience, rest. [3]

What we are ingesting here, week in and week out, is feeding us, changing us more and more into the people God is creating us to be. Here we are being shaped more and more into people who are able to love God and to love others as ourselves.

May we pray with the Psalmist: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” [4]

Amen.

[1] <http://stpaulsfay.org/garrisonkeilloronepiscopalians.pdf>

[2] I am indebted to the Rev. Henry Langknecht, Pastor and Professor at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=386

[3] <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/16/opinion/sunday/oliver-sacks-sabbath.html?action=click&contentCollection=CarterPromos®ion=Article>

[4] Psalm 51:10