

Honestly now

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on August 30, 2009, the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost.

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

Mark 7:15

There are some 613 laws in the Jewish Torah and it has been thought that the people of ancient Israel practiced ritual cleanliness for ceremonial reasons. It was more practical than that. When the great plagues devastated the population of medieval Europe, it was the Jewish people who were largely spared. It turns out that their ritual hand washing proved to be for good and practical purpose in preventing infection and disease.

The Canaanite religion had a hierarchy of gods for everything. The Hebrew for Lord is Baal, together with Zebub, the God of the Philistine City of Ekron, means "lord of the flies," or Beelzebub, one of the names for Satan in the New Testament. William Golding's 1954 novel and subsequent film, *Lord of the Flies* portrays what can happen when human nature is left unrestrained. In the story, a dozen English schoolboys are stranded on a deserted island and are left to their own devices with no adult supervision. They take on a bizarre animal-like behavior and form a hierarchy of authority and divide into warring factions resulting in a savage murder of one of their own.

With our increasingly consciousness about protection from contagious diseases, the Bible tells us that diseases of the spirit are no less contagious. In the letter of James we are warned to refrain from anger and aggressiveness that leads to sordid and wicked behavior. We must not only hear God's Word, we must act on it. He adds that if we think we are religious and don't watch our mouth, our religion is worthless.

The Pharisees, as keepers of the ritual codes and laws, object to the disciples eating with unwashed hands and dishes. Jesus responds by saying that there is nothing outside us that by going in can defile, but it is those things that come out of us are what defile us. If we observe all the external dietary laws and rules of ritual cleanliness, it means nothing if we do not act out of sincere belief. Nothing is gained if we go through all the motions and rituals of faith with no inner conviction. Without a true and sincere faith there is no true practice of religion. We can memorize all the bible verses we want and we can commit to memory the Prayer Book service and the hymns, but if we have no inner conviction, our faith is in vain and devoid of meaning.

The upstanding member of the church on Sunday who makes his family miserable and is a tyrant at the office is practicing his religion without faith. If what is said with our lips is not in our hearts and practiced in our lives, it is all hypocrisy. The test of a true faith is that it comes from a conviction deep within. Unfaithfulness, promiscuity, theft, murder, selfishness, deceit, envy, slander, and excessive pride all come from within and defile us as if it were a debilitating contagious disease.

What this is all about is learning to assume responsibility for ourselves. We can't get away with avoiding personal responsibility for our behavior by placing blame on others or on our past. There may be explanations for the way we behave, but they are no excuses. Being a victim of abusive behavior is no excuse for being abusive to others. Being responsible for our selves

means not blaming our behavior on our past, our genes or on abuse of alcohol or drugs or trends in modern society.

Several Alcoholics Anonymous groups meet here during the week. Their success rate is founded on the principal of mutual support. It has been observed that there may be more genuine faith going on in A.A. meetings during the week than on Sunday morning. The first step in the program is to admit that you are powerless over your disease and addictive behavior and to acknowledge that your life has become unmanageable. The second step is to believe that only a power greater than your self can restore sobriety. The third step is to turn your will and life over to a higher power. These very difficult steps are often made only after bottoming out and having to start all over.

The A.A. program teaches that you have to be completely honest with yourself about what is going on in your life. It teaches victims of addiction to admit their shortcomings and to ask forgiveness of those they have offended. And if you manage to turn your life around you have to work every day to stay sober. While the program has sponsors for those who seek help, no one else can make the necessary changes for you. Change is something that has to come from within. When confronted with serious addictive behavior, you are responsible for getting our own life in order.

The key to becoming responsible for your self is to ask for help. For individualists that can be very difficult. Pelagianism was one of the heresies of the early church that claimed that you can pull yourself up by your bootstraps without the help of anyone else. In dealing with serious problems, all of us need a higher power, the power of God working deep down inside of us.

Anger that is kept deep down inside of us over a period of time can be a source of depression. A very personal spiritual turning point for me happened years ago when I received help to release some hurt and anger I had been carrying around for years. In a very real way, I felt the uplifting energy of Christ freeing me of hurt and anger. I felt the personal assurance of Christ's forgiveness working in me. Unloading old anger is only the beginning. Our spiritual journey as Christians is spent working on growing spiritually, emotionally and intellectually. We are all a work in progress in becoming the Christians we are meant to be and we are never complete until the day we stand before God.

In his early years, Benjamin Franklin was in the printing business. In the churchyard in Philadelphia where he is buried, you can see his epitaph he wrote in which he believed that he would once again appear like a book in a new and more elegant edition, revised and corrected by the Author.