

**Sermon for Proper 17 B**  
The Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost  
September 2, 2018  
The Rev. Paul LeClair

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

In the Name of God,  
whose power in us, can do infinitely more  
than we can ask for or imagine. Amen

- Ephesians 3:20



Every perfect gift comes from above,  
from the Father of Lights, from the Lord of Love.  
This joy that I have that I'm singing of, is from the Lord.  
That's where the joy comes from. That's where the joy comes from.



In this morning's reading from Deuteronomy we heard Moses  
instructing the people of Israel to,

"keep the commandments of the LORD your God."

For many of us who've known the Ten Commandments for most of our lives,  
it can be easy for us to lose sight of what an extraordinary set of laws  
the Ten Commandments were in their time.

This was what led Moses to command, "You must observe them diligently,  
for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples,  
who, when they hear all these statutes, will say,

"Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!"

Indeed, the high standards set by the Ten Commandments  
did make the Hebrew people stand out and be recognized by others  
and they've had a lasting influence on cultures around the world throughout the ages.

The writer of Psalm 15 set the bar even higher.

I have to admit that I can't honestly say that I've led a blameless life.

Every week when we recite the confession of sin, even though we use the word *we*,

I know those words reflect my own personal thoughts and misdeeds.

Does Psalm 15 set an unattainable standard? Yes, without question.

But still it is a worthy ideal to strive for. As the saying goes,

“Shoot for the moon. Even if you miss, you'll be among the stars.”

Can we do this? As we Episcopalians say, “Yes, with God's help”

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In the selection we heard from his letter this morning,

the epistle writer, James, had something to say about this

“Every generous act of giving, every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.”

In his words, James told the early Christians that they could

(1) rid themselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness,

(2) and welcome with meekness the implanted word

that has the power to save their souls.

I'd probably remind myself of this in this way.

“With God's help, I can prevent putting my foot in my mouth, quit tripping over my own ego, and avoid messing things up all the time.”



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Now let's consider the Pharisees that Jesus encountered in today's Gospel selection.

By today's health standards, the Pharisees were way ahead of their time.

And on the right track. My friend, Julia, a school nurse, would greatly approve of the practice of washing your hands before eating.

And how many of us wash our dishes with antibacterial detergent or sanitize them in the dishwasher?

In Jesus' eyes, the Pharisees' problem was not their health practices.

The trouble was: how they were using them as weapons to judge and exclude people or as misguided attempts to inflate their own sense of self-worth.

As imperfect people, we humans do have our tendencies to warp good things into unsuitable ones.

At St. Patrick's we have a bowl of water behind the last pew.

The intention is to provide an opportunity for people to bless themselves as they enter the nave to prepare for worship.

People may also do this as they leave, to ask for God's guidance as they serve beyond these church walls.

Now, reminding ourselves of our dependence on God's help, in all we do, is a good thing.

And any ritual or practice we do, that affirms our faith, and reinforces our desire to serve God, by serving others, has great value.

However, if anyone considers himself or herself as being better than those who don't practice this ritual, then they would be acting much like those Pharisees, who were judging those who didn't participate in the same cleansing ritual as they did.

It seems to be part of human nature for most of us to be drawn to people most like us, and to fear those who appear to be different.

But the Scriptures give us quite a different and higher vision.

The Hebrew Bible in *one* verse commands, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," but in no fewer than 36 places, it commands us to "love the stranger."

Here's how this might look in today's world.

Carolyn was driving home late one chilly evening.

As she approached her street, she saw a car stalled on the side of the road.

The hood was up, the car's flashers were on, and a man was bent over the engine.

A few feet away, a young woman, wearing a hijab, held an infant in her arms as a toddler clung to her legs, shivering.

Carolyn pulled over and asked if she could help or call someone.

The man looked to his wife, whose eyes were wide with fear.

"No, thank you," he said tersely. "My brother will be here soon."

"Well, you can at least use a little more light," Carolyn said, as she offered a flashlight to the man.

Then she turned to his wife and said, "Please, sit in my car.

I've got the heat on. You'll be more comfortable there."

After some gentle coaxing, the woman agreed.

To try to put the frightened woman at ease, Carolyn pointed out her own house that was just down the road.

Soon, the brother arrived and helped the husband get the engine running again.

The wife looked Carolyn in the eye for the first time and quietly thanked her.

A few days later Carolyn heard her doorbell ring.

It was the young mother standing on the porch holding her baby girl as the young boy this time clung on to a tray of sweets.

"My name is Fatima. I want to thank you for your help the other night," she said with an accent that indicated that English was a second language to her. Carolyn invited the woman in and made coffee.

"I want to apologize to you for the other night," the woman began.

"You were so kind to stop and help, yet we treated you as if you were a criminal. We're new to the area, and everyone had warned us that this neighborhood was not welcoming to Muslims.

When you came along, we didn't know if we could trust you.

But your kindness made us feel safe for the first time in our new home."

The good within Carolyn's heart, changed Fatima's less-than-good *outside* impression of her so that she could recognize the goodness *within* Carolyn.

Carolyn's offer of help, transformed a family's *fear* of their new neighborhood so they could see it as a place of *welcome*.

The kind of human beings we are, begins in the values of our hearts, the place where God dwells within.

We must not forget though, that the evil we're capable of, also begins within.

When God's love is displaced by selfishness, fear, anger, or hatred, we can inflict hurt on others and degrade the beauty of God's creation.



Let us pray for God to instill in us, his spirit of compassion and justice.

May the Holy Spirit empower us to transform the imperfections of the world *outside of us* into the goodness of God's Kingdom, that can flow *from within each of us*.

Our Collect this morning is a way in which we can do this.

Let us pray.

Lord of all power and might, you are the author and giver of all good things:  
Graft your love in our hearts; increase true religion in us;  
nourish us with all goodness; and grow the fruit of good works within;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns  
with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen.



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Sources:

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