

WHAT WOULD JESUS SAY?

Psalm 133; Matthew 15:10-20

This has been a hard week! Professionally I, along with other ministers in the PC(USA), was challenged by Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson as he addressed the events of last Saturday in Charlottesville, VA. In his letter written to all clergy on Monday morning, Rev. Nelson asked, "What did you preach to your congregation this past weekend? Did you preach a *prophetic word* of liberation addressing the context, content and consequences of our urgency to act in these times, or did you preach on Sunday's lectionary text about Jesus walking on water?" Of course, I preached the sermon I had prepared earlier in the week, based on the Lectionary passage of Jesus walking on the water. However, the leader of our denomination continued that many disregarded their prepared sermons and addressed the events of Charlottesville and the evils of white supremacy, neo Nazi, and racist behaviors. He continues, "Someone sat in the pew yesterday seeking a contextual understanding of Scripture related to the events of this past week while trying to make sense of it all. If we did not address this issue, then we did not faithfully interpret the gospel message that was relevant in our cultural context as a nation of people."

After reading the rest of his letter, with which I agreed, I felt chastised for neglecting my duties to serve God and this congregation in addressing the issues that divide our nation and world and determined that this week I would speak the Word of God in relation to the continuing events. So, of course the first thing I do is turn to the Lectionary to see what the texts are! And these are the ones the Holy Spirit chose for this week.

So what would Jesus say about the events of the last few months, weeks, years? What would Jesus say about the way we treat each other? The labels we place on each other? The disrespect shown to others? The disregard for human lives?

In this passage from Matthew Jesus is being questioned about the laws of ritual cleanliness that are not being observed. He responds, "Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart, come evil intentions. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

Matthew records this exchange as a way for the church of his day, a church that is becoming more a blend of Jews and Gentiles, as they sort through which traditions to carry forward as they form the new church. Jesus is stressing that rituals and traditions are of no importance, relationships take priority. That clean hands and clean food haven't importance if the heart is not in the right place.

On Wednesday I accepted the long-standing invitation to join the Thomasville Rotary Club. One part of the ritual in that meeting was to recite the Four-Way Test as a measure of all the things members think, say or do:

- 1 - Is it the truth?
- 2- Is it Fair to all concerned?
- 3- Will it build Goodwill and Better Friendship?
- 4- Will it be Beneficial to all concerned?

Lloyd Navarro, Rotary District Governor, was the speaker for the meeting, and told of his work while on active duty in Afghanistan. During his three years, the anniversary of Rotary International was being celebrated, but Navarro was not a part of the celebrations since he was in a part of the world without Rotary presence. However, Navarro decided to invite 10 Afghan men to invite one person each to join him for a meal. That meant that 20 people were gathered in a room for a meal, some of whom Navarro knew, others he did not. There was an interpreter present that helped those present to understand. As they ate the meal together Navarro shared that he could not be a part of the celebrations taking place in his own chapter and decided to share this very important time with these new friends. As a part of the explanation gave each one written information with the Four-Way Test on it and explained the importance of observing these ideals. The dinner ended and Navarro bid each one farewell, admitting that he might never see or hear from any of the people at that meal again and might surely never know if his sharing had any impact on their lives.

Fast forward to four years ago... The phone rang and – then retired – Navarro answered to the voice of a US military officer asking for Lt. Navarro. "No, I retired several years ago." The voice asked Navarro to hold for an international call. In a few seconds, a voice speaking the language native to Afghanistan began to speak, broken by an interpreter. The caller identified himself as the son of one of those men who had broken bread with Navarro so many years before. The son shared that that evening meal had made a tremendous difference in his father's life and had changed the way his father had conducted himself in the home and in business. Though his father had since died, the son wanted to thank Navarro for the difference he made in his life by sharing that time with his father.

What would it mean for the church to follow Jesus into the toxic waste areas of the world? What would it mean for the faithful to fret less about the how we "have always done it this way" and listen more to the cries of those who are considered "unclean" or "unwanted"?