

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

August 14, 2005

Sermon Text: Matthew 15:10-20

Now the birth of my new grandson, Eli, has reminded me that children arrive here knowing nothing. We have to teach them everything! Even the traditional kid myths that children are mistaught in every generation. I notice that mothers sometimes tire of saying, “Because I told you so!” and they make things up. Yes, they do.

I had a friend in high school, whose mother used to tell him, “Stop playing with your belly button!” He said, “Why?” She said, “Because if you push it, your legs will fall off!” He said he was about 12 before he got the strength and the courage to push his belly button just to see.

When my best friend and his wife had a son, he was playing with his young son, and his aunt told him, “Don’t hold that child upside down!” He asked why, now he teaches biology at Greenville Tech. His aunt said, sincerely, “You’ll flip his liver!”

My own mother told me once, “Stop swinging so high on the swing set!” I said, “Why?” She said, “Because if you go over the top, you’ll turn inside out.” Now, I had seen my father’s anatomy books, and I didn’t want all that stuff hanging loose on the outside so I started swinging lower.

Now our outside seems so important these days! Physical beauty and image and fashion, I thank God I’m a Methodist minister, and I can cover a multitude of fashion sins with my traditional black robe. I don’t have to worry about my outside very much, even in this public hour of worship. Now, traditions, externals, some things we think are so important, simply aren’t, and some things we think important aren’t even true. Some things have changed so much that they used to be important, but they are not important anymore.

There’s an old preacher’s story, but it’s so old, it may be new again. A young wife was preparing a canned ham, and she methodically cut about one inch off the right and one inch off the left, and she put it in the oven. Her husband said, “Why did you do that?” She said, “I never thought about it. That’s just the way my mother did it.” She never questioned it so she called her mother. Her mother said, “You know, I don’t know, that’s the way my mother did it. Why don’t you call grandma?” The young wife asked her grandmother, “Grandma, why do we always cut about one inch off the right and one inch off the left sides of the ham before we bake it?” The grandmother laughed and said, “Honey, the only reason I ever did that was because the pan I had was too small, and so I had to cut it to fit, and gave the slices to the dogs. Those dogs loved ham day!”

Some traditions used to make sense, but not any more. Some are just to make us look good and have nothing whatever to do with being good or faithful or serving God. It seems the Pharisees, if you read through Matthew especially; they twisted the law and traditions to their own advantage. Now they would even take the money that they ought to have used to support their aged parents, and they would say, “This money I dedicate to

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the Lord,” and they would set it aside. Now, they would set that money aside while their parents declined and died! Dedicating the money to the Lord sounded pious, but was in fact hateful toward their own parents, and did nothing for God because they just said it was dedicated. They never actually gave it to the synagogue. They just kept it. Jesus calls them hypocrites, and they were. Serving God with their lips, but from their hearts, from their insides, they were far, far from God. I know that sometimes outsides do make a difference. I can’t diminish that. I remember that I was thinking about this sermon. I said, “You know, honestly, I had known my wife, Caroline, since kindergarten, and I saw her go all through grade school and through junior high and high school and through some awkward phases.” Now, some of us don’t have our awkward phases until we’re about 48. I was visiting one of our older members recently, and she was describing to me her son by saying, “He’s tall, a little taller than you. He’s got a beard like yours, and he’s losing hair in about the same pattern you are.” That’s a heck of a way to find out you’re losing your hair. That’s the first I’d heard of it! Anyway, after knowing Caroline forever, we went to different colleges from high school, and then I met her again after a couple of years at the beach, after having not seen her since high school, and she had a perfect tan. She had a perfect tan. She had been running with her friends. She had sun-bleached hair and a green sundress. I remember. I had known her since kindergarten, and she was always a friend of mine, but that night, I saw her in a whole new light. Sometimes, outsides do matter, but of course, to make a play on a phrase, since then I have found out that marriage and family is not always a day at the beach. There is much more to life than outsides. Much more. And more pointedly, there is more to faith than just going through the traditional motions. Traditions do not evolve to aim for excellence. Traditions aim low. Traditions aim at the minimum, the superficial, the nod and the wink, that if we do this here, then we are good, and then we can do whatever we want away from here. You know, the only time that Jesus ever lost his cool was about show faith, without any heart reality. Remember how Jesus reacted to the moneychangers in the temple, who were more interested in making a profit, than hearing the prophets? And remember how angry he got at the hypocritical Pharisees, whose words in no way matched their actions? It seems to me that Jesus did not like the Pharisees because they were so religious. About the rules and the regulations, they were! About the nitpicking little ways of the faith they were! The Pharisees were on top of that. They knew the right way to pray. They knew the right way to dress. They knew the right way to study. They even knew the right way to wash your hands. You’ve heard in the gospel reading the implied haughty snide from Matthew where they essentially came to Jesus, and said, “Excuse me, Jesus, but why do your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? They did not wash their hands. You see, they kept the trifling little rituals. They kept the traditions, and they showed up at synagogue to stare at anybody not dressed properly, but somewhere along the way they had forgotten the calling that was theirs, to be a light unto the nations, unto the world, to share God’s word and the way God wants us to live together to the whole world. They set a ridiculously low standard of faith. Faith to them equaled simply modeling traditions for each other. To me, it’s almost like they were saying, “Hi, I’m a child of God,” or we could do it to modern day standards, “Hi, I am an acting Christian today.” “Me, too. Let’s do this until around 12:00.” They talked a good religion, but they did not have the heart for it. They were

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keepers of tradition, but they were forgetters of Commandments. If you look up hypocrite, even today, if you look up hypocrite in a thesaurus, you will find Pharisee as one of the synonyms.

I make it a point through lectionary to preach more or less through the Gospels in the course of year, over a three year cycle, and when you do that the Pharisees show up quite a bit, especially in Matthew. In my count, 29 times in Matthew. In my very first appointment, one woman in my first church used to think that I was talking directly to her whenever I read a passage about the Pharisees. Once, all I did was read the Gospel message, and she got up and walked out. I remember thinking to myself that even if I thought that passage was aimed at me, I wouldn't get up and announce it to the world, but she did. This story though is not to be turned around the other way. It is not for us to sit back and aim at the Pharisees and feel out of the line of fire. This passage is for all of us. The gap, the chasm between our public and our private faith is known to God, and it might as well be confessed out loud. I am also, as we are all, sometimes a hypocrite. We can be self-righteous about being a hypocrite. We can rationalize that into saying that my standards are so high that even I can't live up to them so, of course, I'm a hypocrite. I don't know about that. I preach truth. If I am honest, sometimes a little lie will still find its way to my lips. I preach faithfulness and trustworthiness in marriage, and by the Pharisaical letter of the law, I am pure as the driven snow, but by Jesus' standard of lust in the heart equals adultery, I am lost every time a Victoria's Secret catalog arrives. I've never been so interested in women's swimwear until recently. When we say one thing here, and go home fussing or fighting or talking down our brother or sister in Christ, we are all hypocrites of the first order. How hard it is to be sincere and warm in faith and thoughts and actions! What a lifelong journey requiring every bit of God's help through his spirit! What a journey this faith of ours is! How quickly do I step back whenever I meet anybody who says they no longer struggle in their faith because I remember that neither did the Pharisees struggle in theirs. We work out our faith with fear and trembling as the Scripture says. No matter how perfectly constructed and insulated and polished our outsides may be there is still brokenness within. The force of sin is real, and there are cracks and breaks in every honest soul, cracks that only God can heal. Listen with your hearts to what Jesus is saying. What you are on the outside is not important to God. Our insides and our actions, which flow from heartfelt beliefs, what comes out of us matters and from within come evil thoughts which lead to thefts large and small, and hatred and bitterness, and thoughts of violence, and sometimes even thoughts of murder, or lust or adultery or coveting our neighbor's success or wife or husband or car or dog or cat, deceit or lying, all these things, envy and pride, they come from our thoughts, and sometimes they appear in our actions. All these come from within, and they defile a soul. Even if our outside image and our grooming and our presentation is perfect, all these defiling actions start as thoughts from within, and they can bear evil action in our lives. Jesus cares about our insides, our hearts. What's going on in there? What thoughts occupy the greater part of your daydreams and your heart's desire? Is it possible to act out your faith each and every week in church, and still be filled with bitterness and envy and hatred and fear and harmful desires? Yes. Yes, it is. The Pharisees were a prime example. So religious in their traditions and so corrupt in their every thought and motive.

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Inside, they had no desire to be with and grow with God in faith. They were men of power in the community. They were men who followed all that was necessary to keep their power, to keep their wealth, even using legal trickery to neglect their own parents, but it was all for show, all for the outside, and God sees through it.

A close friend of ours once moved with her husband to California. She was a CPA, and she had gotten her degree and her license, and she was going to interview for some jobs. She bought a book, and in the book it had diagrams of what kind of haircuts and what kind of clothes were right for a woman in banking. With the book in hand, she went and got her haircut. With the book in hand, she went and bought her wardrobe. Imagine! This woman had all these credentials, and all these studies and academic record and experience, but the business world demanded the right haircut. Externals! Now, there are reasonable limits, of course, but outsides seem to matter too much these days, and what's inside doesn't seem to matter enough. Our hearts and dreams and faith get too little attention. It may be because we're worried about things like fashion and style and haircuts. Remember Jesus was the one, who said foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head. He was a homeless, itinerant preacher. An outcast! He did not fit in. He had no desire to fit in anywhere except in God's will in his heart. Part of us is hidden from view and part of us shows to the world. Which is real? God sees both. To God all things are revealed, and very often, we are satisfied with our image alone. God is looking for something recognizable in your life and mine. Are you my child, he asks? Where is the family resemblance? Not in the eyes or the nose, but in the heart. Attitudes of love and forgiveness and peace and compassion for others. An attitude of building up in unity and purpose. Outside can be perfect, polished, immaculate and impressive for all to see, but God looks for his children in the heart. As Christians, we are on the way here, but we may be a different way at work, and maybe something else entirely at home with our family, but James reminds us in the first chapter that a double-minded person is unstable in all his ways. When we try to be more than one person and live in more than one world, we very soon will fall to pieces. I have met, and I'll confess, sometimes I have been, an outside of just silly putty waiting for the next person to come along and reshape me in whatever image they want me to be. I've done that, but that's a horrible way to live. If you do that too long, you won't have any of your real self left anymore. There is not enough of you to be all things to all people. There is not enough of any of us to try to be all things to all people. Be true to God. Be true to others. Be true to yourself and the calling and the talents and the purpose God has given you. Another thing is this; we cannot bear one another's burdens as a church if we don't know them. We cannot encourage beyond struggles if your struggles are skillfully hidden. We cannot bring healing and support and prayers into your situation if you cover them all up with a veneer of smiles. Some cry out to God, "Why in the world won't you send me someone to help?" Well, God sent us each other, but we don't reach out. We don't trust. We put on a mask, and we stroll like happy robots hoping no one will see through the cracks. We all have flaws. We all have sins. We all have cracks. That's why God gave us each other, and knowing our own faults and sins should keep us from judging each other. It's our hearts God is after. You don't have to memorize rituals to get God's love, you already have it. You already have it. What comes out of you

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because of your faith? I started thinking this morning as I went through my ritual, not a religious ritual, but a health ritual of taking my vitamins and my minerals. We, some of us, at least I do, we take in vitamins and antioxidants and chromium and ginkgo biloba and flax oil and an aspirin a day, and we use only olive oil and vitamin E. We're very careful about what goes in. Shouldn't we give as much care to what comes out? All we can do by caring for our diet is live a few days or maybe a few weeks longer, and then we die, and we stand before God, and give a report of what we did with those days. Living longer is not good in and of itself. Living well and loving well and loving God and loving neighbor and being self-connected counts for something. Keeping the tradition by itself means nothing. Keeping healthy by itself means nothing. Keeping low on the radar and never behaving badly enough to get caught means nothing. What about the sins of omission where you could have done something, but did nothing. What we do counts, and what we fail to do counts. Externals and opinions of other people and being nice and calling that Christianity, that does not count. Sometimes, our faith demands truth telling and boundary setting and justice promoting and calls each of us to repent and to grow and to change, and that upsets us when we are called to grow and change. That is why some early Methodist pastors got shot at and tarred and feathered and run out of town. Maybe if I'm faithful enough to my ordination the same fate will fall to me. I hope not. I was hoping there would be laughter at that point. As we close, I'm sure that will get an amen, as we close, I want to play off the word, for just a second, devotion. Devotion is your heart, mind and soul sold out to God. We have added an S to that word, and we've made it not a huge concept, but a tiny little five-minute time in which we read our Upper Room. Instead of devotion as the platform and foundation of our life, we do devotions that can be scheduled, and five minutes later stopped, and five minutes after that, forgotten. Devotion is foundational and bedrock. You build your life upon it. It never stops. It is the compass, the direction, the substance, and the core of who you are. Devotion inside to God. Quite a difference between five minutes and a life-spanning devotion that guides you through all the choices of who you are. Inside out. Do we follow our faith even when it takes us out of our comfort zone? Do we want to be free from the lies and the traps and the snares that sin wraps us up in? I guess it comes down to this. Do we trust what God has said in Jesus Christ? Do we trust God that there is a better way? A kingdom not of this world with standards not equal to the world's standards. A way of life, a way of life following after Jesus Christ, but far different from what the world calls success. Do we trust God inside out? You know the answer. Inquire within. Have heart faith and live it out. Amen.