**15th Sunday after Pentecost – Year B – September 9, 2012 – Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY**

**Based on Mark 7:1-23 written by Pastor Paul Horn**

**“Serve God with a Clean Heart”**

*The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and 2 saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were “unclean,” that is, unwashed. 3 (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. 4 When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.) 5 So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with ‘unclean’ hands?” 6 He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:*

*“‘These people honor me with their lips,*

*but their hearts are far from me.*

*7 They worship me in vain;*

*their teachings are but rules taught by men.’[b]*

*8 You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.” 14 Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. 15 Nothing outside a man can make him ‘unclean’ by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him ‘unclean.’” 20 He went on: “What comes out of a man is what makes him ‘unclean.’ 21 For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, 22 greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. 23 All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean.’”*

This time of year is difficult. With all of the trash-talking, the name-calling… and I’m not talking about the football season… I’m talking about the presidential election. It’s awful, isn’t it? It’s hard to listen to all of the accusations, the lies… how can you tell who is telling the truth? It’s no different today than it was in Jesus’ day. There were political parties that were guilty of dragging someone’s name through the mud.

There was a group, religious leaders, called the Pharisees, who told lies about anyone who spoke contrary to what they taught. Naturally, when Jesus came along, they slandered him. One day the Pharisees observed Jesus’ disciples and saw that they did not wash their hands before they ate. And you wouldn’t think this would be a big problem. But there was a tradition in Jesus’ day, this was a tradition of the Jewish religious leaders. After they came home from shopping in the marketplace they would wash their hands, cups, pitchers and even their dining couches with water before they ate their food. A good healthy practice? Sure. But the Pharisees had different reasons for washing. They believed that when a Jew went to the marketplace, it was very possible that the individual could come into contact with something considered “unclean.” An unclean animal, or maybe even an unclean Gentile. So in order to be ceremonially “clean”, that is clean before God, they had to wash hands.

Naturally when the Pharisees saw Jesus’ disciples come home from the marketplace, sit down and eat without washing their hands, they were appalled! They asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders? Why do they eat with unclean hands?” The Pharisees were accusing the disciples of being unclean.

With Jesus’ answer, he admitted that his disciples didn’t follow the tradition. Moses hadn’t even done this in his day! But they weren’t sinning, because it was a tradition, something invented by man. The problem was that the Pharisees burdened the people of Israel with these traditions, saying that in order to get right with God you have to follow these traditions. Outwardly, the Pharisees looked like pretty good people, because they washed their hands and so on. But Jesus made an important observation. He said, **“The prophet Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites**, ‘**These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men**.” (vs6-8) They had made their traditions more important than God’s commands.

Then Jesus said, “Eating food without washing your hands won’t make you ‘unclean.’ What makes a person unclean before God is what comes out of that person, what comes from their heart. Because the heart is naturally full of the filth of sin and it shows in our thoughts, words and actions.” “**For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly**. (vs21-23) One of those sins really sticks out, especially this time of year with elections less than two months away: slander – slander is speaking in such a way as to harm or ruin someone’s reputation.

Did you watch any of the Republican or Democrat conventions? Many of the speeches made the other party look like a bunch of scoundrels! Have you ever listened to radio talk show hosts or watched an interview with a politician on the television? Depending on the network, the reporters often make the candidate or other party look like villains! Is that not the sin of slander? It is one thing to state the facts, but it’s quite another to say things directed against individuals in order to ruin their image.

How does God want Christians to view their elected representatives and those who don’t agree with our political party platform? Our God commands us to love our neighbor. Our neighbor is everyone in this world. What God is saying that you show love to your atheist neighbor who wants to keep creationism out of schools; your neighbor who wants to make gay marriage and abortion legal; your neighbor who celebrates death penalty statistics; and yes, even the presidential candidate from the other side. Can we disagree with people? Sure. But God wants us to speak with words that are seasoned with love and truth (based on facts not gossip or hear-say). We have a responsibility as Christians to stand against laws that directly violate God’s Word. We have the responsibility to support those laws that uphold God’s Word. We can exercise our privilege to vote and change those laws, and in a loving way. But when we vilify those individuals who don’t agree with us, are we showing the love that God demands from us?

God also demands in his Word that we obey our governing authorities (unless they tell us to do something that goes against his will – Acts 5.29), that we pray for our elected officials, give them respect and honor and pay our taxes if the government requires it (Romans 13 & 1Peter 2). I remember driving my car one day and I was listening to a political talk show on the radio. The things this man was saying about our government and our elected officials made me so angry at them. I could feel my temperature rising (along with my blood pressure). I had to change the station. Then I stopped and thought about it. God has placed these men and women in authority over me. Am I giving God’s representatives honor and respect when I allow talk show hosts to fire me up, to shape my thinking, rather than allow my God to shape how I think? Is this the attitude my God expects from me, a citizen of heaven, a member of the family of Christ?

This sin of slander is not unique in the world of politics, but between husbands and wives, children and parents, employees and employers, and sadly between church members – we say things to ruin their image, to make ourselves look better.

What I am doing is nothing different than what the Pharisees were doing in Jesus’ day with their man-made rule of washing hands. I make up my own rules. I justify my anger and my slander and say, “They don’t deserve my honor and respect.” And I think that somehow I’m doing God a favor. I think of myself as a better Christian than others. On the outside I may look like a pretty good person. But these sins that flow from my mouth reveal what is in my heart. And then I read a passage like this one from the Psalms, “**Who may stand in the holy place before the LORD? He who has clean hands and a pure heart**.” (Psalm 24:3-5) Not me.

One of the questions in this year’s election is, “Are we better off now than we were four years ago?” If you believe you’re worse off this year than four years ago, think about the government in Jesus’ time. There was a governor named Antiochus Epiphanes (whose name means “God made manifest”) attempted to destroy every copy of the Jewish Torah (the Jewish Bible). He required the Jews to offer sacrifices to the Greek god Zeus in the temple. He even erected a statue of Zeus in the temple in Jerusalem and sacrificed a pig on the altar. When the Roman general Pompey conquered Jerusalem he massacred the priests in the temple. Herod the Great, king of Judea, was responsible for the murder of all the infant male children in Bethlehem. The civil government of Rome was almost undoubtedly pagan. What was Jesus attitude toward his government?

When his government required him to pay taxes, he didn’t complain. In fact, the Bible says, that he paid them willingly. When the religious leaders slandered his name he didn’t fire back with a string of commercials on television or fiery Facebook posts, but reached out in love and pointed them to the truth of God’s Word. When Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, wrongfully condemned him, an innocent man, to death by crucifixion, he willingly accepted his injustice. To the Soldiers who acted as the government’s sword, Jesus prayed for them, asking the Father to forgive them. Jesus told his disciples and apostles, who were being persecuted by their government , to teach their congregations to pray for their leaders, to honor them, obey them, respect them.

“**Who may stand in the holy place before the LORD? He who has clean hands and a pure heart**.” That’s not me. That’s Jesus! He is the perfect citizen who lives with perfect obedience. He is the One who doesn’t make his own rules, but follows the Father’s laws with his whole heart and soul.

‘**O LORD, cleanse me, and I will be clean! Wash me and I will be whiter than snow**!’ (Ps 51.7) My fellow citizens, he has done just that! Paul tells us in Ephesians, “**Christ loved the Church (even though her members had hearts who were unclean) and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the Word**.” (Eph 5:25) By his perfect obedience and the innocent blood that he shed on the cross, Jesus has cleansed your hearts. He has washed you through Baptism, a special cleansing designed to wash away the mud and filth of your sinful hearts. Through your baptism Jesus has made you a citizen of his kingdom. “**Who may stand in the holy place before the LORD? He who has clean hands and a pure heart**.” That’s me and that’s you, through faith in Christ.

Seeing all that Christ has done for me motivates to want to do his will. I want to allow him to shape my attitude toward his representatives. Because I know that this sin of slander is a difficult one. From our Second Lesson James told us that this sin of slander is a difficult sin to contain. He wrote that taming the tongue is like trying to tame an unbridled wild horse. We know this. And so we will pray for strength to tame our tongues.

Because you know… that later today or this week, you will watch the news or read the paper or an internet article or talk to someone about the election, and someone will speak badly of elected officials. And your heart may be tempted to evil thoughts, or anger, or malice, or slander. When I fall to temptation, I will look again at the life Christ lived for me, and I will thank him for my baptism, where he has washed me clean, and I will ask for the power to live for him. I will keep my eyes and ears away from those places that will tempt me to anger and slander and lies. I will instead find unbiased sources that speak the truth and make my decision for this year’s election based on truth. I will study God’s Word and allow him to shape and form the way I think. And we will use these mouths to cry out, “**Create in me, a pure heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me**.” (Ps 51:10) Amen.