

Sunday's Sermon

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

250 Fox Hill Road ■ Hampton, Virginia 23669

September 1, 2024

The Reverend David E. Fox

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Year B) 2024

Mark 7.1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

My great-aunt, Sarah, later in life, married a man who was a pastor in the Salvation Army. The name he went by was Major. I don't know if that was his rank in the Salvation Army, or if it was a nickname, or whether it was his real name. When he knew I was going to seminary, he did his best to sway me to serve in the Salvation Army rather than the Lutheran Church. I'll never forget him sharing what the Salvation Army did for communities. "Our motto," he said, "is soup, soap, and salvation. And in that order." They, unlike many other soup kitchens, made sure that before anything else, the people who walked through the door first were fed, had an opportunity to shower, and don clean clothes. It was after those needs were met they told them about Jesus. Most other soup kitchens that have someone preaching, make you go to the sermon before you can get a ticket to receive a meal through their line. Though the Salvation Army is not by definition a church, they are a ministry of the church doing the very things that Jesus calls us to do. If our first priority is not to help the homeless, hungry, lonely, orphaned, and widowed, we have lost sight of what it is that the church does. Are we offering the community around us words and actions of love or are we offering them words and actions of criticism?

We just finished our bread discourse in John. The last time we were in Mark's gospel, we heard the story of the feeding of the 5000. Just when we thought we were done with bread, we have another story centered around food. This story finds its place in Mark's gospel, between the story of the feeding of the 5000 and the feeding of the 4000. We can see that food scarcity was a very real matter in Jesus' day. Jesus' disciples have sat down to a table, clearly with a group of others, to eat. I think it is safe to say that in a food-scarce society, if folks sit down to eat, they are hungry – and eating to satisfy hunger, not to eat out of boredom or because of stress like we Americans tend to do. The religious leaders call out Jesus because his disciples have started eating without washing their hands.

Most of you parents are thinking, "Yes, they better be washing their hands before they eat." However, the controversy around handwashing in this story is not about sanitation. The controversy is over a tradition from the Talmud, not the Bible, that one is to use a fist full of water to ritually purify themselves before eating. We know that a fistful of water with no soap, is not really washing your hands according to today's standards.

The issue is not at all about cleanliness but rather all about tradition. Traditions such as this were known as purity laws, to create a system of who is in and who is out. I think Major would have had a big issue with what the religious leaders were fussing about in Jesus' day. I think he would say something like, "Hmm. Soup, Soap, and Salvation. And in that order."

The religious leaders lost sight of their first priority as followers, worshipers, and servants of the LORD. Their first priorities were to focus on the needs of the people around them – the homeless, hungry, lonely, orphaned, and widowed. The religious leaders were not offering words and actions of love rather they were

offering words and actions of criticism when they said, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”

Churches and churchgoers are notorious for being highly critical. We believe that things must happen a certain way, appear a particular way, and be precise in our way of thinking. Sometimes our traditions, those that have been around for thousands of years and those that we made up because we like the idea, get in the way of our main priority as the church. Many congregations might be called hypocrites by Jesus, because they have lost sight of their main priority - people - and forgotten how to offer words and actions of love.

Our reading from James instructs first-century and twenty-first century Christians with how we are to live godly lives. We are to be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; we are to be doers of the word – not hearers who forget but doers who act. James tells us, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for the orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

Folks, we seem too worried about trivial things rather than the people that matter. It seems that we worry ourselves about how many people are in the pews, what type of music we sing, whether the liturgy was the 1972 version or something new and foreign to us, if the event we’ve always done remains the same way that we’ve done it for the last twenty years, keeping the status quo and never reforming and transforming into something new. When we hold on to things too tightly, we let the people who God is calling us to care for, to serve, to love slip away. We’ve made the church about us and meeting our needs and keeping our traditions; when what the church is really in the business of doing is sharing the love of Jesus with those in the lowliest of situations.

My fear is that we’ve not only forgotten to share the soup and soap, but we’ve also forgotten to share the salvation. Soup, soap, and salvation. And in that order. If our first priority is not to help the homeless, hungry, lonely, orphaned, and widowed, we have lost sight of what it is that the church does. Are we offering the community around us words and actions of love or are we offering them words and actions of criticism?

“But, Pastor Dave, we don’t have a soup kitchen here and we don’t have a place for folks to take a shower?” And my answer is “And we ain’t the Salvation Army, either.” We are Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, a group of people who love Jesus, and who are called to serve those in the community in which we have been planted. What is it that we have to offer? Or let’s put it another way. If Gloria Dei closed its doors today, what would the city of Hampton lose other than a place to worship on Sunday morning and a school for 16 months through eighth grade? What would our city lose? You might be at a loss to answer that question. You can name things that you as a church member would miss, but you might struggle to answer what our city and the people who live in it would lose.

If we’re not offering soup or soap, what is it that we can offer to help those in need? When the worship has ended, how are we beginning our service to our LORD and to God’s people? Though I like the phrase “Soup, soap, and salvation. And in that order.” We can extend the salvation of Jesus Christ in all that we say and do. It is in extending Christ’s salvation through words and deeds that we offer them the love and mercy that they so desperately need.

Sisters and brothers, be doers of the word, care for those in need, be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. Lay aside the trivial matters, and focus on what really matters – the people. And in all things – extend to those in our neighborhoods the salvation of Jesus Christ. These should be our priorities. It’s time that we make them our priorities.