

Not long ago I conducted a search on the internet where one of the results that popped up came from the “Live Strong” website. Some of you might remember the Live Strong campaign. Many people identified with it by wearing those yellow rubber wrist bracelets that had “live strong” imprinted on them. The Live Strong campaign was initiated by the famous cyclist Lance Armstrong. Through the first part of the 21st century, Lance Armstrong was arguably one of the greatest athletes in the world. Armstrong managed to win a record seven consecutive titles in the grueling Tour de France bicycle race. What made his achievements all the more amazing is that Armstrong did it after surviving a battle with cancer in the late 90’s. Armstrong was a source of inspiration to many. But then, you may recall how Lance Armstrong had a fall from grace when it was determined that Armstrong had been using blood doping and human growth hormone to enhance his performance. The United States Anti-Doping Agency stripped Armstrong of all his titles because he wasn’t “racing clean.” In spite of all the good that Armstrong may have done with his Live Strong campaign, his reputation was in tatters. Obviously, “living strong” and “living clean” meant different things. And although these terms perhaps mean something a little different when it comes to this text we consider today, I believe that Jesus also wants those who are listening, including us this morning, to consider what it means to “live clean” and what it might mean to “live strong.”

The Bible uses the language of clean and unclean all the time. During Jesus’ day, the Pharisees...the moral authorities of the day were obsessed with what they referred to as ritual cleanliness, which to them had everything to do with one’s being socially acceptable...with living strong. For the social behaviour police of Jesus’ day, living clean was all about following the rules and practicing good

habits. Good habits that included things like washing one's hands before eating. According to the behaviour police of Jesus' day, eating with filthy hands just made you more filthy! Now I think we all would agree that washing one's hands before eating is a good thing. Even prior to the Covid 19 phenomena , hand washing was something we taught our children to do as a practice of good hygiene. In today's gospel reading the Pharisees accuse Jesus and his disciples of being unclean because they do not wash their hands before eating together. In first century Judea people often ate out of the same dishes with their hands, I think one can imagine why this would be an issue. There isn't one of us here who would walk into a sandwich shop and not expect to see someone making our sandwich without those little plastic gloves on.

Yet Jesus wants his listeners to think about what is clean and what is unclean in different terms. Jesus offers up one of his hardest sayings when it comes to identifying who is clean and who is unclean. For Jesus, although there may be issues of personal hygiene in this world, when it comes to being right with God, what makes a person clean or unclean isn't the condition of their hands when they sit down to eat or the state of their body odour for that matter. Jesus argues that it's what's inside that makes us unclean, thus no one can be deemed "ritually" clean. Not in the way the Pharisees and so many others believed those habits would make a person clean or socially acceptable. No matter how many times we take a shower or bath, no matter how many times we sanitize our hands and break out the Lysol, you're never going to get to the heart of the matter. As Jesus says, it's the evil intentions from within that are the issue...the cleanliness of the heart...the soul. This is something that lingers beneath the surface.

It lingers beneath the surface like phytophthora infestans. Ever hear of phytophthora infestans? Are there any potato farmers here? Phytophthora Infestans is what caused the Great Potato Famine in Ireland in the mid-19th century, It's more commonly known as potato blight. I came to better understand what potato blight was years ago when my Mom was harvesting a crop of potatoes from her garden. What I learned about the potato blight from my Mom's experience, is that the blight doesn't really effect the outward appearance of the potato. You could look at a blighted potato and think it was healthy and nutritious, ready to be baked and dressed and enjoyed with some sour cream and bacon bits. But when you slice open a blighted potato, you see what doesn't meet the eye when all you see is the outside. Blight consumes the potato from the inside...where you encounter a mushy, rotten mess.

This is exactly what Jesus is referring to when he talks about what it means to be unclean. And Jesus isn't being critical of only the Pharisees here, he's not singling them out. Jesus says this is a condition of the human heart...it is a problem with all of us. Like the Pharisees and so many others, we may do our best to look our best, to eat right, smell right and exercise, work on our "good habits" ...but there is still this blight that affects the human heart. So even if we look great on the outside, and even if we celebrate our victories and encourage others to "live clean" and "live strong" our hidden hungers and deep desires within are our true selves. We humans are still susceptible to weakness. As Paul the Apostle said "the good that I would...I do not, and the evil that I would not...I do."

You see, when Jesus said, "For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from

within, and they defile a person." He wants us to look deeper with a critical eye...not at the outward appearance of ourselves or others.

It's easy to focus on outward appearances. When you think about it that is how we judge most things in life. We do so quickly with an eye to what we see on the surface. Think about how often we can take a passing glance at a homeless beggar and make all sorts of assumptions about how that person ended up on the street and why they are in the situation they are in? Or maybe we have an eye towards someone who always has a smile on their face, who looks so fit and beautiful, someone who seems to "have it altogether" yet if only we were to look beneath the surface, we might be surprised at what we would or would not discover. It would take so much more work and so much more time to stop, maybe have a conversation and take a deeper look and judge more carefully or maybe discover in the end that we should not judge at all. As the Christian writer and thinker A.W. Tozer once said, "A pharisee is hard on others and easy on himself, but a spiritual man is easy on others and hard on himself."

In a sense Jesus wants us to be hard on ourselves if we are to truly "live strong." Not that we are to see ourselves as totally depraved and thus become eternally depressed and without help. It's just that we understand that spirituality and the measure of a person's goodness is not something that is skin deep...it is a matter of the heart. Jesus serves to issue the Pharisees the truth that everyone is ritually unclean, standing in the need of grace and prayer...of healing and renewal. It really does call for a long hard look within ourselves in order that we might get beneath the surface and beyond the shell. This is something we are reminded of in Psalm 51 that says, "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me." We have to look within ourselves.

Finding a heart of our own, considering the matters of the heart...our own hearts...this is what Jesus was on about. Clean hands don't make a clean heart any more than dirty hands make a dirty heart. It is greed not grime, malice not money, deceit not dirt, arrogance not alcohol, selfishness not sex that makes us unclean. Religious or social rituals will not cleanse us from envy, slander, and arrogance. Jesus offers us these words this morning because he wants to transform people from the inside out, not from the outside in. If we are to live strong than we must believe in being heart strong. That is what the spirit of Christ seeks to offer us and others...it is the gift of a new heart, a heart of faith, a heart of hope, a spiritual heart of love.

This is the gift that will allow humans to "live strong." -To live with the strength of community, relationship and fellowship. It's the strength that comes when we no longer point fingers but instead seek to join hands because in our weakness we discover our need for each other and discover that we're not that much different from each other...and maybe while we're at it find a way to not be so hard on one another. But in order to do this, we are called as a people of faith, to believe in this Spiritual heart...that we possess such a thing. Not that physical heart that pumps our blood and governs our body's circulation...but that other heart that can be a source of life for ourselves and for others.

A "spiritual" heart does not mean just our emotions (though it includes our emotions). In the scriptures the spiritual heart refers to our inner orientation, the core of our being...the totality of our response. Where our physical heart is seen as the centre of our physical being...the spiritual heart is at the centre of our spiritual self. Think of when you say to someone, "my heart goes out to you." When we say this, it is more than a feeling of concern. If said sincerely, it

communicates a sense of solidarity with someone. It means more than “I understand” or “I sympathize.” It means something like, “I stand with you in this.” It is an expression of a fundamental choice...a decision of the self that connects us more deeply to another. It is a spiritual connection...a heart to heart connection. Or sometimes it’s a disconnect. Like when someone who shows no enthusiasm for a project, we might say that “his or her heart isn’t in it.” We usually say this when people behave in a way that is at odds with their deepest desires. We say it about ourselves when we hurt people that we love and do things that we know are at odds with who we really are. There is a disconnect with ourselves and a disconnect with those around us.

You see, this “heart” is what God is concerned with. It’s why God decided to give us his heart in Jesus so we might know the totality of God’s response and love for us. That we might be reconnected. As Blaise Pascal said, “It is not the mind that receives God, it is the heart.” As Christians, when we look at Jesus, we should hear God saying to us, “my heart goes out to you.” A heart that is filled with faithfulness, kindness, justice, humility, grace and love. This isn’t a God who is disconnected and detached from this world and our lives...in Christ we meet a God whose heart is in it. A God whose heart is for us and seeks to share this heart with us. It’s a heart of faith that moves us into a deeper personal experience of God, a deeper understanding of our own needs and desires and a deeper connection with the ones around us. It’s where we come to know the deeper grace of God, how we need this grace in our own lives and we live to share this grace with others.

God knows that if we are to live strong, we must be heart strong. And when we open our hearts to Christ and the Spirit he brings to our lives, we have the

heart of a God that moves us beyond the surface and gives us the power to live stronger together.