**August 30, 2015 – 14th Sunday after Pentecost**

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There’s a lot of news swirling around the Internet these days about the website, Ashley Madison. For those of you who don’t know what it is, lucky you. However, I’m going to tell you now, so plug your ears if you still want to remain blissfully ignorant. Very briefly, mainly because I don’t’ want to get a bad taste in my mouth by talking about it too much, it’s a website where married people can go to find other married people to have affairs with.

I know – yuck. My first reaction on hearing about this is, “What the actual HECK? Why is this even a thing?” And I’m sure I’m not alone. But lest you think this is some kind of back street, underground creepy-crawly website, I looked it up on Wikipedia for you. You can thank me later for taking one for the team.

I didn’t read it all because, as I said, yuck. But I read enough to find out that it has 39 million subscribers! 39 MILLION men and women in marriages or committed relationships who are looking to cheat on their partners! Yuck, yuck, yuck! I bet this is one of the only sermons you’ll hear with the word, “yuck” in it so many times!

I promise I’ll get to the Gospel in a sec. Naturally, with that many subscribers, statistically speaking you’re going to run into some high profile cheaters. Ordinarily we wouldn’t hear about them all at once, but some hackers got hold of their supposedly secure data and outed thousands of them at once.

One of them was Josh Duggar, but since he’s already been outed as a scumbag before this, I won’t waste time on him. Another news item flying around the Internet is the fact that 400 church leaders are expected to resign, probably tomorrow, as a result of their names being on the list. Oh the schadenfreude! Oh the glee over these terrible hypocrites being shown for what they truly are! Personally, I think the number of clergy is pretty small number compared to the actual number of people on the list, but why spoil the fun?

Which brings me, in a roundabout way, to today’s Gospel passage. Welcome back to Mark, after five weeks away in John’s Bread of Life discourse. And what a way to get back in! Mark, the shortest of all the Gospels, doesn’t mince words very often, and it sure doesn’t here.

To set the scene: Jesus has just returned across the Sea of Galilee from the feeding of the five thousand. In Mark’s version, they fetched up at Genessaret, which isn’t too far from Capernaum, also at the north end of the Sea. Mark doesn’t say if Jesus was teaching or not, as he is in John, but he does encounter some Pharisee’s and Scribes.

Mark makes a point of saying that some of them had come all the way from Jerusalem, which is nearly a hundred miles away – no small trip on foot or donkey. This is important because it shows that the Jewish authorities were taking notice of him and already trying to figure out ways to entrap him.

The settle on what they see as an obvious failing – that Jesus would tolerate unclean behavior in his disciples, something no TRUE prophet of God would do. The idea of washing hands in a ritual way, as opposed to merely good hygiene, had been long batted around by two different groups of Pharisees, those from the School of Hillel and from the School of Shammai, who were two influential rabbis from a generation before. In the original 613 laws of Torah, hand washing was a ritual that only priests had to do before touching holy objects or animals in the Temple, but the growing Rabbinic tradition had expanded that to include hand washing for everyone, just to be safe. So it’s not technically part of the Torah, but rather of the Talmud, which is the expanded Jewish law.

This is what Jesus is talking about when he says, “You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.” Then he goes on to explain just which commandments they have abandoned. Here’s a clue – pretty much all of them, and not because they do or don’t wash their hands.

But he’s not talking about what people do overtly. After his interaction with the Pharisees and Scribes, he calls the crowds of people back together. Presumably, the Jewish leaders stuck around to hear what he had to say:

*Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. 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.*

It’s not that Jesus doesn’t care about the Torah. All of those things he lists definitely fall under the ten commandments in one way or another. But he goes a step further. It’s not only DOING these things that are sinful – it’s the intentions of our hearts that count, too. In other words, according to Jesus, God doesn’t care about clean hands so much, but he DOES care about clean hearts.

This is where the whole Ashley Madison thing comes in. All those people whose names were leaked to the public, all those 400 church leaders who are supposedly going to step down because of the scandal, they were clearly participating in that website before July 15th when the site was hacked. They were happily going on their adulterous ways without a care in the world, and the world couldn’t see. But God could see what was in their hearts, and saw it as evil, I believe.

But though we may not be participating in such an overtly bad activity, what evil intentions are we, each one of us adults at least, hiding in our hearts? Envy? Slander? Pride? Folly? I think all of those can be seen in the glee with which regular folks see the mighty as fallen.

But Jesus doesn’t rank his list – each thing is as bad as the next, and intentions are as bad as actions. And, as he tells the Pharisees and Scribes, adhering to a set of man-made laws and rules is meaningless.

Which is why we need Jesus. Our hearts are not capable of perfect love, which is the only way that we can keep all bad intentions away. But the heart of God – Jesus – is and it’s through him and through his love for us that we find our salvation.

Jesus doesn’t give any solution to the dilemma of our falling into the patterns of bad intentions. HE is the solution. God’s love through his Son shoves out all evil – either intentions or actions. But it isn’t automatic because we can always decide to sin in thought, word, and deed anyway. So we have to constantly be on guard and turn our thoughts to God whenever we find ourselves going down that road.

Angry at someone and looking for revenge? Think about Jesus on the cross saying “Father, forgive them for they don’t know what they are doing.” Feeling envious of the good things someone else has? Think of God completely emptying himself to become human for our sake. Hanging onto money that could be given away to someone who needs it more? Think of Jesus saying, “Greater love has no one but that they lay down their lives for their friends.”

The list goes on and on. But the point is not to have pertinent Bible verses at your fingertips, although that can certainly come in handy. The point is to think of God so often that it’s second nature. Or as Paul put it best, in First Thessalonians:

*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

Because it’s impossible to be angry and malicious when you’re rejoicing. It’s impossible to be deceitful and slanderous when you’re praying. And it’s impossible to be proud and envious when you’re giving thanks. Plain and simple. So let that be behind all our intentions and direct all our actions, and where we fall down, let us ask God for forgiveness. Because God does forgive and has already forgiven us through his Son our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen.