

**Sunday, August 30, 2015**  
**Rev. Diane Monti-Catania**

**Sermon – " It's What's Inside that Counts"**

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Yankee short stop, Derek Jeter, used to go through a ritual of fixing his wrist bands and pointing his hand skyward before he took his place at bat.

He never wavered from this practice and hundreds, if not thousands, of young ball players imitated him as they approached home plate on little league fields throughout the country.

Jeter created for himself a ritual that likely gave him a sense of well-being, focus and calm in the tense moment when one awaits a 95 mile an hour ball being thrown at you.

One would be hard pressed to prove that Jeter's ritual enhanced his performance as a ball player.

However, to him, it had meaning.

We find comfort in establishing routines that calm us; habits that create predictability on some level.

We are more relaxed when we know what to expect.

The word ritual originally applied only to religious rites.

Over time, the word has come to connote any sort of repeated activity that has particular meaning.

Perhaps it would be better described as habits that take on significance in the life of a person.

Rituals can enhance our experiences, giving us greater focus or a sense of calm or they can become controlling activities that negatively impact our experiences.

For me, the ritual of my Sunday morning worship preparation provides an opportunity to set aside the distractions of the week and to center myself in God's presence, opening my heart and mind to the Holy Spirit.

I get up early and spend about an hour reading devotional material and scripture, followed by a time of prayer.

Then I scan the news headlines, review my sermon for the day and come to church.

Once here, I spend time in the Meetinghouse reviewing the service and reading through my sermon again.

On days when something takes me away from this routine, I find I am disoriented, not as focused as I like to be when leading worship.

This habit has become a ritual for me, one that I enjoy.

I'm not sure that my leadership is enhanced by the ritual, but it provides a certain level of comfort for me.

It makes me feel that I am prepared and ready to worship God.

How about you? What rituals do you follow in your life?

Are they helpful or distracting?

In our text this morning, Jesus admonishes the religious leaders for worrying more about the exercise of the ritual, rather than the meaning behind it.

The Pharisees are adamant that the rules of religious tradition be upheld, especially those restricting dietary practices and cleansing.

Jesus makes the point that it is not the ritual that is important – it is that the ritual was meant to serve God, by preparing the person for worship.

The ritual of coming to church is meaningless if attendance is the only goal.

Unless you are here to participate in the worship of God, to seek forgiveness for your sins, to contribute to the building of God's kingdom, to let your heart be transformed, attendance is meaningless.

In today's passage, Jesus addresses three different audiences: a group of Pharisees and scribes who raise the question of defilement, the crowd that is perpetually present, and the disciples who, true to character in Mark's Gospel, don't understand.

The message is delivered differently to each of these groups, but its essence is the same: our very selves are defiled, made unholy, not by what we take in, but by the corrosion of the human heart.

Jesus's three different versions of this message build on one another, thus enabling a fuller understanding of what is at stake: we must prepare our hearts, and thereby our selves, for the kingdom of God.

This requires not worrying over what we "eat," but how.

We are challenged to live righteously and justly by following God's law, living with humility and integrity and ensuring that we don't focus on outward observance, but allow our hearts to be changed so that our service of God and others is a true, *heartfelt* response.

Jesus' position with the Pharisees and later his disciples is that external activities cannot cleanse your soul.

The condition of your heart and soul depends on you.

It is internal.

How you act; what you say; the thoughts in your mind; the love in your heart – these are the things that define you as a follower of Christ.

The heart is understood here as the center of human will and rationality, in addition to desire.

It is the place from which all our intentions arise.

Jesus offers a list of evil intentions that, while not comprehensive, certainly reveals the depth of corruption that the heart suffers.

The quest to follow Christ and work to bring God's justice into our world can be tough, disheartening, and dehumanizing.

Earlier this week the Deacons and I had a conversation about all of the craziness in the world and the personal losses many of us have recently faced.

We talked about the need to recalibrate, rejuvenate and reorient ourselves – to root ourselves in God's presence.

I suggested that it would be intriguing to explore ways to develop the ability to habitually re-center in the context of church.

Wouldn't it be glorious to be able to come each week to this gathering and feel a sense of well-being.

I do believe that this is the place where we ought to be able to put aside the horrors of injustice and the very real impact of evil across the globe, as well as our personal sorrows and find a sense of calm, of peace, of God.

One commentator this week lamented:

“It is a pity that for too many people religion – especially Christianity – is seen as cold, institutionalized and heartless. It seems we have become more like the religious leaders who were concerned with keeping the outside clean than we would like. We have, too often, made following Jesus about excluding “sinners”, and keeping ourselves pure. As such, our faith has driven wedges into families, set communities at odds with one another, and ignored real issues of justice in favor of asserting our own particular “rights” or needs.”

These are hard words for us to face, but until we do, we cannot restore our own faith to the passionate, Christ-following, neighbor-loving, heart-capturing movement that Christianity really is.

As individuals and churches, we will never be effective in reaching our communities, our friends and our families with the message of the Gospel, until that message is the inspiration of our own lives.

When our hearts are captured by the Gospel, and when we become passionate lovers of God, of people and of the world, we won't have to “preach” in order to be heard.

The Gospel will be seen in our lives, and others will know the life-giving touch of God through us.

As individuals and communities of faith, let us not underestimate the value of passionate hearts, both for our own spiritual health, and in bringing healing and restoration to those around us.

Let's take a close look at our rituals and make sure that they have meaning for us.

Examine those things that you feel you must do and make sure that they are making you a better person – more deeply rooted to God and to neighbor.

Let's spend some time in the year ahead discerning the many ways that we can reorient our lives toward God.