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Church of the Resurrection  
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Proper 17 Year B

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

Psalm 15

James 1:17-27

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

In 2022, the Episcopal Church released a study that asked the question: What characteristic do you most associate with Christians in general? The report gave the results in who identified in three categories of religious affiliation: people who identified themselves as Christian, those who identified as part of another religion; or those who reported not being religious. The results made many of us sad and wondering.

Not religious and non-Christian people selected judgmental and hypocritical as the top two characteristics they associate with Christians In general.

I don't know about you, but I do not like being called or even perceived as a hypocrite or judgmental. These words make me feel defensive and less likely to be willing to have an open conversation with someone who might think of me that way. At times, I was sure that if the respondents knew Episcopalians or the other "right kind" of Christians who walked the talk, they would have answered differently.

I've thought about this survey and what it means for me as I wrestled with this week's Gospel reading. I imagined I understood a bit what the Temple leaders thought and felt when Jesus called them hypocrites.

Today's lectionary selections return us back to the Gospel according to Mark. We arrive at a point in Mark's Gospel after Jesus has fed the crowd, stilled the storm, and healed people. The crowds who followed him grew larger. Given how quickly news about Jesus traveled, even without social media, it is no surprise that the Pharisees and scribes would want to have a conversation with Jesus. Mark portrays this conversation in an adversarial way—a way for the Temple leaders to trip Jesus up, to undermine the growing number of people who were following him.

The Pharisees and scribes were making a serious charge against the disciples. Jesus doesn't dismiss the concerns of the Pharisees and scribes. He doesn't dismiss the purity laws they are referring to. Like them, Jesus knows that God gave the law to help people get closer to God and to be in relationship with each other. The spiritual instructions of Torah allowed Israel to survive persecution and preserve their community life together.

Instead of condemning the Temple leaders, Jesus holds up a mirror to them, using Isaiah to call them hypocrites. Jesus recalls for them, and us, of Isaiah's prophetic reminder to the people of God that God looks at our internal dispositions—our hearts.

Jesus calls the leaders hypocrites, because he sees that they focus on other people's outward actions. Jesus knows that some leaders have turned their hearts away from God and have turned toward power and judgment. Externals, such as ritual action, have taken priority over spiritual depth in their lives. Their actions are no longer a way to give thanks to God and deepen a relationship with God. This focus on ritual tradition without a connection to God's teachings about relationship with others has turned many of them away from the needs of the poor, the widows, and the oppressed people around them.

Jesus tells the leaders to return to God's covenantal relationship and to return to God's call that what we carry inside our hearts, our spirits, is most important. This is a call from Jesus to examine our intentions before we take any action. It's a reminder that being faithful to God is not only about what we do. It is about singleness of heart and relying on a relationship with God to guide us and lead us.

Five years ago, at a conference for deacons, the Rt. Rev. Michael Hunn, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of the Rio Grande, presided and preached at the Eucharist. Some of the words of his sermon surprised and puzzled me. Five years later, they still challenge me.

Bp. Hunn, whose diocese is a leader in ministry at the borderlands, talked about the need for Episcopalians to deepen our understanding of what it means to be disciples of Jesus so that we are more deeply rooted in Jesus. He commended the deacons present and the wider church for our social justice ministries and our responses to community needs. At the same time, he reminded us of the very teaching that Jesus offers us today—that following Jesus requires a both/and approach. We must turn our hearts to God so that all that we do aligns with the heartbeat of God. Our actions in the community and the wider world must be rooted deeply in God, by tending to our spiritual lives. Spiritual focus and relationship with God allow us to faithfully discern where God is leading us to act in the world.

St. Augustine defined the Christian life as long-term training that moves us to **do the right** things in the **right** way for the **right** reasons. Just as praying and worship shape what we believe, praying and worshiping in community together—as well as on our own—are part of how we begin to be open to distinguishing what is from God and what is from our own egos. This is part of our call to discern together how to make decisions that exemplify the alignment of our hearts and minds with God. As the Psalmist says, we are called to speak truth from the heart and not to give our money for gain; not to make ourselves look good or feel better.

As I consider the survey results and the time we are in, I'm certain that Jesus would hold up a mirror to me and have something to say to me about looking at others as the problem.

I know that I need to look inward and give my heart more fully to God. It is easier for me to be judgmental than I realize. I know God calls me to listen more openly, more deeply and to

listen longer to people I disagree with. If someone has a point of view that isn't like mine, I need to be more curious about where they are coming from.

If someone questions our beliefs, opinions, or the reasons for why we do the work in the community, each of us is called to look into our own hearts and minds and find how we can meet them where they are—to learn about their positions, opinions, and reasons for them. For only in that way can we deepen our understanding of our neighbors and our own call to be who God created us to be as a community.

As we enter more deeply into our discernment of God's call to Resurrection Jesus reminds us to look within and deepen ourselves in God; this internal work allows us to align our heartbeats with the heartbeat with God. Today, as we begin the Great Thanksgiving and respond to the invitation to, "life up your hearts" let us lift our hearts together as an offering to God to open each of our hearts so that each of us and all of us together can be more be more fully and wholly God's and be and do all that God hopes for us and our work in the world.

May it be so.