

Sermon for Sunday, September 2, 2018 - "What's Inside"

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 2, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Sometimes I wonder what Jesus would have to say about social media. Certainly, it can be a good tool. I should probably use it more for the sake of ministry and I know I often miss important things that people share there. (Which is to say: If you post something on Facebook and want your pastor to know about it, please tell me some other way, too!)

Social media can be very helpful. Yet, I join many in wondering whether it keeps us on the surface of our lives, too focused on how we appear to others. We show the world all the attractive, humorous, appealing highlights of our lives and not the vast messy remainder of how things really are. Then we compare our actual lives to other people's highlight reels and our mental health suffers. Some people are able to be more honest on social media, and for that I'm grateful. Yet, we so often carefully curate our online presence to project a certain image about ourselves - the witty social critic, the happy parent, the righteous prophet, the gentle soul.

Concern for how we look to others is not new to social media. And our public persona is often very different from how we really live. I used to think it was funny how my mom would be yelling at me one second, and then answer the phone all sweetness and light. Now I do the same thing. My Christmas cards often make things appear much rosier than they really are. Congregations look so energized on Rally Day and New Member Sunday, less so in the middle of Lent with lots of soup suppers to organize. Luther College on first-year move-in day is very different than Luther in late February.

Of course, there are good reasons to try to put your best forward - to represent yourself, your family, your institution well. It isn't all bad to consider how you look to others.

In fact, God often instructed the people of Israel to consider how they appeared to other nations in order to bear witness to God's goodness and holiness. In our first reading today, Moses told the people, "You must observe [the commandments of the Lord] diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!' For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him?"

Many Israelites took this charge quite seriously; the Pharisees certainly did. They observed the law very carefully so that they could be a witness to other nations and give glory to God.

In Jesus' time, when Israel was living under the occupation of the Roman Empire, the Pharisees felt strict adherence to the law and the traditions was even more essential - it was a way to show that they were resisting Rome's oppression. So, when some scribes and Pharisees saw Jesus' disciples not washing their hands, they worried that it would look like they were giving in to the power of Rome.

These religious leaders knew that appearances can really matter. They had some legitimate concerns.

Yet Jesus had a deeper concern. Jesus could see that these leaders had become so focused on the externals of faithfulness that they neglected to examine their own hearts. And while there can be good reasons to think about appearances, Jesus is more concerned about what is within us.

All the focus on the externals was leading the scribes and Pharisees to put up internal walls between themselves and others - between the quote, "clean" and the "unclean". Their faith practices weren't drawing them closer to God and their neighbors, weren't reflecting the holiness of God, but were means of excluding people they considered dirty or contaminated.

Though these leaders tried to present a squeaky-clean image, Jesus could see the evil in their own hearts.

Jesus can see the evil and ugliness and judgement within our hearts as well.

We also focus too much on externals and put up walls. We have different ways of judging and separating ourselves from others; we're quite proficient in doing that, with lots of help from social media. We pay much more attention to what others are doing wrong than to the sin within us. We neglect to examine our own hearts. The good news is that Jesus sees all this and yet he does not turn away.

He sees right through our highly edited versions of ourselves, knows what lurks in our hearts, yet loves us still.

Jesus also shows us what truly matters through his own life. He crosses boundaries, eats with social outcasts, and touches those considered unclean. He loves, serves and gives his life for all people - tax collectors and sinners, lepers and demon-possessed people, scribes and Pharisees, you and me. There are no barriers that can stop Jesus from seeing you, loving you, forgiving you.

This good news exerts a claim on our lives, a call to follow his ways.

Following Jesus means that, like him, we cross boundaries to serve others, that we live out an inclusive love and welcome, that we care especially for those the world has cast aside. Following Jesus is not about outside appearances but about a heart cleansed and a life shaped by the radical, self-giving love of Jesus.

Today, at the table, Jesus meets you to give of his very self. Here Jesus promises that you are known, loved and forgiven, and calls you to follow.

Let's join in silent prayer.

