

January 26, 2020

*“Unclean Lips”*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Isaiah 6:1-8

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Okay, I have to admit right up front that the impetus for today’s sermon is all this impeachment stuff going on in Congress. Just hearing all those politicians and newscasters talk, makes my skin crawl. Their rhetoric, their viciousness, and the way they distort and manipulate all that they say. That’s why I chose today’s scripture about unclean lips! Now to put this scripture in context – if you took the time to read the preceding chapters – God is angry with the Israelites because, as a nation, they have forsaken him. Very similar, in my opinion, to what’s happening in our country today. So God is looking for help. He wants someone to help spread his message – that God loves his people and wants them to return to him so he can bless them. And there’s Isaiah.

Now before I go any further, imagine God looking for your help, needing you to do something good for him. It makes me think of Jesus and the woman at the well. Envision yourself standing there, bringing up your bucket filled with water, and suddenly you look up and see Jesus walking toward you. And then, imagine him saying to you, like he did the Samaritan woman, “Give me a drink.” Wouldn't it be an enormous honor to think that Jesus Christ needed you to do something special for him, to show him an act of kindness and care? To me, that would be so wonderful! To be able to show God my love. Because, you see, I’m afraid I can speak for all of us when I say that so often, we're only in the habit of wanting God to be kind and caring to us. That's just our nature. So maybe we should reflect on this question – how much kindness, devotion, love... have I given God this past week? (Pause.)

Now when I think of giving directly to God, I’m reminded of Jesus’ words, “Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me.” Which means that obviously, the way we give anything to God is all in how we treat others. How we are God’s messenger, proclaiming his message that God loves all his people, and welcomes them and wants to bless them. And, of course, that’s something I think we all aspire to do. However, so often we fail. Why? Well, as I alluded to earlier, I think one of the primary reasons we fail is... these... (pointing to our lips)... our unclean lips. What comes out of our mouths. Listen again to Isaiah... "Woe is me! I am doomed, for I am a woman of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips."

Because think about it for a moment. Truth be told, we're all guilty of having unclean lips, aren't we? Swearing, gossiping, sarcasm, ridicule, angry words, caustic replies, malicious expressions, debasing remarks – all directed at someone else. (Long pause.) Think of the words you use, and then consider this: in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives an example of what might send someone to hell. He says, "Whoever calls another, 'You fool', will be liable to the hell of fire." And how many times have we said something worse than that about others. Just consider for a moment the pain and hurt and suffering our words have caused others... in our families, with our friends, in our church, in our country. Consider how often we have used our words to espouse our own opinion without listening to the opinions of others. And in doing so, we diminish the other person. You know, I talk about the politicians, but how often have we used our words to twist the truth, to exaggerate or leave out certain facts, and we misrepresent a situation, in essence practicing deceit. How often have our words turned people away or put up barriers, creating separation or even estrangement. Yes, woe is us.

Here's another thing: even the Holy Trinity is commonly referred to by unclean lips. Just yesterday, I heard a mother hollering at her daughter in frustration for misbehaving in the grocery store, using the expression, "God (expletive), I told you I am not going to buy that junk." And how often have you heard "Jesus Christ" used disrespectfully, in order to give emphasis to the speaker's feelings. And, of course, many times, the "holy" part of the Holy Spirit, is used with a four letter expletive to make a stronger, more dramatic point. Yes, we are a people of unclean lips.

As many of you know, my husband John, grew up Catholic. And many of you are former Catholics as well. If you remember back years ago, Catholics were to abstain from eating meat on Fridays because it was, quote, a sin. That is until Pope John XXIII, changed things. And John told me there were many times when he was growing up that his mother thought the price of fish was too high, but the ground chuck was affordable. So guess what the Mincieli family had for dinner on those Friday nights. Yep – meatloaf! And John used to delight in provoking his mother by reminding her that it was a sin to be eating meat on Friday... as if she didn't know. But my mother-in-law had a come-back. She quoted Jesus, saying "It's not what goes in your mouth that's a sin, but what comes out of your mouth that's the sin." It's not what goes in your mouth that's a sin, but what comes out of your mouth that's the sin.

And I say all this today in light of that question God asked Isaiah in our scripture. "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Here stands God needing to send someone to do his work – to be his

messenger, to speak of his good news. And there stands Isaiah. But, before God even asks if Isaiah might be that person, Isaiah must come to repentance and the realization that he must change. And the live coal taken from God's altar is a symbol of his cleansing. And once that happens, Isaiah says with conviction, "Here I am, send me." And here in the year 2020, God really, really needs to send people to do his work in this world. To be his voice – to proclaim the good news of Christ – to speak from their lips words of love, speak of forgiveness, speak words of peace, speak of justice. Because that's what God wants to offer the world, to offer all his children. And so he asks, "Whom shall I send?" "Whom shall I send?"

You know Jesus once told a parable about a man who wanted to send his two sons into the vineyard, the world, to work for him. He went to the first and said, "Son, I need to send you to work for me today in the vineyard. Will you go?" "Yes, I will, sir," the son replied. But he did not go. With his unclean lips he said one thing, but did another. He lied. Then the father went to his second son and said the same thing, "Son, I need to send you to work for me today in the vineyard. Will you go?" "I will not," the second son replied. But afterwards he thought about what the father had asked him to do, and he changed his mind, and he went into the vineyard to do his father's work. And Jesus asks, "Which of the two sons did what his father desired?" Obviously, the one who repented and changed and did the good work for his father.

Now there's one more twist to our unclean lips. And that is – our lips are also unclean when we do not proclaim the word of God. Let me share a true story about a well-known pastor. He tells of the time he was in graduate school at Vanderbilt University, preparing for his final exams. He would go every night around 11:30 or 12 o'clock to an old diner near the University. It had no tables, just little stools, and he would sit down at the counter and have a grilled cheese sandwich and a cup of coffee, and take a break from his studies. It was the same every night, he would walk in and the cook behind the counter at the grill would automatically prepare his grilled cheese sandwich and pour his coffee. And without asking, he would refill his coffee cup. One night, he noticed an old, gray-haired, black man come in who stood at the far end of the counter. He stood there a long time to be waited on. Finally the cook went over to him and said, "What do you want?" Whatever the man said, the cook went over to the grill, scooped up a little dark patty off the back of the grill, put it on a piece of bread without condiments, without a napkin and handed it to him. The old man gave the cook some money and then went outside and sat down on the curb to eat it, the cars and trucks rolling by on the wet street seasoned his sandwich. That

pastor didn't say anything. He did not reprimand, protest, or witness to the cook. He did not go out and sit beside the man on the curb. He didn't do anything because he was thinking about the questions coming up on his Bible exams. But he still remembers to this day, as he left that little place, and went back up the hill to his room to resume his studies, off in the distance, he heard the sound of a cock crow.

Sadly, we live in a world that is full of people who are willing to say with their lips "yes" to all the right things, but then never deliver. And the work of God remains undone. And yet, aren't we here this morning because we want to give Jesus that drink of water? Then let us consider our lips – our words, what we say, how we say it. Then, with the grace and mercy of our Lord, God, let us proclaim the words, "Here I am Lord, send me!" Amen.