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Homily - Watch Out For Falling Coconuts!

Luke 11:37-41

Well you have heard the mission trip reports. I too would like to thank the congregation for their support. One aspect of the Habitat trip that is different from when we conduct a Bible school is that you get to see a tangible result. You have something to show for it – the complete exterior of a house, a house that will one day serve as somebody’s home. And yet, there was more value to our work than simply a visible result. People worked together, gave of themselves, and grew together. And although everything was not always perfect, there was an over-riding good feeling of being on the worksite. The house then also serves as a symbol of all that transpired during the week. Something good happened within us and there is something outwardly to show for it. The homily this morning will look at what we show others and what is within us. The text is Luke 11:37-41.

“While he was speaking, a Pharisee asked him to dine with him; so he went in and sat at the table. The Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not wash first before dinner. And the Lord said to him, ‘Now you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of extortion and wickedness. You fools! Did not he who made the outside make the inside also? But give for alms those things that are within; and behold, everything is clean for you.’”

The title of the morning message, said to me by Peggy “at the church” while passing in the hall, “Watch out for falling coconuts!”

Earlier this week the city of Pickering, Ontario issued a charge against 81 year-old Jon Tennant. He faces a possible fine of \$25,000. His crime? - repairing lawn-mowers and other small machinery for his neighbors free of charge. It seems that according to the city zoning by-laws, this constitutes the illegal operation of a home business. Jon’s response to the charge and possible fine of \$25,000 – “They ain’t getting’ it. I’ll do jail time. They could get a lot of

revenue elsewhere than looking at an 81-year-old-man trying to keep his mind busy.” Jon may not be asked to pay a fine though. The public outcry has city officials rather embarrassed and one of them has said he is hoping to change this city bylaw. Just when you thought there was no longer any relevance to the New Testament caricature of Pharisaic legalism.

The Pharisee in our text this morning is “astonished” that Jesus does not observe the purity ritual of washing before dinner. Jesus essentially tells the Pharisee that he focuses on what is on the outside, what others see, and neglects to focus on what is on the inside, what is in his heart. The story is told in such a way as to highlight the externalism of the Pharisee. It is in a similar vein with several other encounters that Jesus has with the Pharisees in the gospels. It should be noted though that at the time the gospels received their final form that the Christian church is at odds with many Jewish leaders. If you recall, the Christian church started out as a sect within Judaism. And in Paul’s letters he discusses whether it is necessary for a convert to become a Jew first before becoming a Christian. Therefore, there is some tendency in the gospels to bring attention to the flaws of the Pharisees. Let us then hear Jesus’ words as being spoken to us. Do we as individuals give our attention to what can be seen by others or to what is within us?

Daniel Webster once stated, “The world is more governed by appearances than realities, so that it is fully necessary to seem to know as to know it.” There is truth to his statement. What people do in the world is determined by what they think, whether what they think is true or not. It then follows that if you want to be popular, successful, included, whatever, the thing to do is to present yourself in the manner that you wish to be perceived. Politicians often go a step further and endeavor to present their opponent in the manner they wish for them to be perceived. We can make fun of it, even be cynical about it, but they wouldn’t pay so much money to do it if it didn’t have some effect. So we must acknowledge that all of us to some degree are governed by appearances and none of us wishes to look bad. The city officials in Pickering, Ontario sure don’t. It ought to also be said that there certainly is some inherent value in appearance. A good presentation shows that you do in fact care.

Several months ago I was channel surfing and came across a program entitled “Man-eaters” on Animal Planet. On it there were stories about shark attacks on people. You may remember that

back in 2001 there were several shark attacks off of the Florida coast and *Time Magazine* even ran a cover story on “The Summer of the Shark.” Well, as the man-eaters program began to shift from shark attacks to crocodile attacks a guy with an Australian accent came on and put it all into perspective when he said, “More people are killed each year by falling coconuts than shark attacks.” I don’t know about you but I’ve never seen a TV show on falling coconuts. I suppose a show with a guy hanging out under a coconut tree could serve a utilitarian purpose... if it was in a Sunday afternoon time slot. I actually looked to verify what the Australian guy said and sure enough it was true. George Burgess, director of the University of Florida’s international shark file said that falling coconuts kill 150 people worldwide each year. The average number of unprovoked shark attacks each year is around 80 and the average number of deaths is 10. So you are 15 times more likely to be killed by coconut than by shark.

I’m guessing you are still more afraid of sharks than coconuts. I wonder... are we also more afraid of looking bad than of being bad? Which of the two is actually more detrimental to us? Conversely, would we rather be seen by good by others or actually try our best to be good? There is only one way to have both. There is an order of priority. The reality must precede the perception. Otherwise, the perception will inhibit the reality. If we can be seen as good when we are not, we are unlikely to ever change. And then we will value and cater to the external affirmative voice even more as that is then what we need in order to feel good about ourselves.

The Pharisee in our text had a way of telling himself that he was good. He strictly observed religious rituals. He was able to keep his outside clean. But the cleansing of the heart is a different matter altogether. It is much more difficult, even for the noblest of people. It is a battle that must be fought daily. For every one of us falls short of the glory of God. To pay attention to our heart is to be constantly reminded of this. We can not begin to approximate the righteousness of God without acknowledging our dependence on God. The Pharisee cleaned the outside of his cup in order to hide from himself that his inside was unclean.

This past Tuesday night in youth committee Betsy Almond told us about a physical experiment that demonstrated how the mind and body typically work together. I’m going to come out of the pulpit and show you this. You begin by lifting and moving your foot in a clockwise motion and

then you raise your hand and pretend to draw the number 6. Every time I do this my foot switches direction to the counter-clockwise motion of the 6. It is actually easier to do this if you are sitting. Try it yourself. Move your foot in a clockwise motion and then draw the number 6...Of course now is when I have prearranged for the youth to drop the coconuts from the balcony. 😊 Anyway, see if it has the same effect upon you. I will concede that there was one person on youth committee whose foot did not change directions and that was Bill Finger. But to discover that his mind worked differently was a surprise to no one. The point is this – If I focus primarily on what is going on up here it will change what is going on down here. And if I focus primarily on what people can see it is going to influence what is going on inside me. The question each one of us must ask ourselves is “which one is dictating the other?” Are you working on your heart to improve your outside? Or are you working on your outside in order to avoid working on your heart? May we have the courage to turn to God and allow him to work on our heart.