

People Are More Important than Things

August 30, 2009

(Pentecost 13 - Year B)

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

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

My mother in-law, Rose Mary, is an expert at quilting. Even before, my wife, Susan, was born, her mother, Rose Mary, loved to sew and to make clothes.

When Susan was just a little toddler, her mother's sewing machine was very simple and basic.

However, Rose Mary began to notice a beautiful new Singer sewing machine in the window at the S&H Green Stamps store.

This beautiful new Singer sewing machine was ensconced in a rich mahogheny wood.

And this beautiful Singer sewing machine had all the bells and whistles on it that a woman would want in 1961.

So, Rose Mary began saving, week by week, her green stamps that she got at the grocery store and the gas station.

Finally, after months and months of saving, the prized Singer sewing machine was hers.

Now my wife, Susan, was just a little toddler at the time.

But she loved to stand right beside her mother as her mother made skirts on her modern new machine.

Susan used to love to peek over the beautiful wooden edge of the sewing machine to watch her mother make button holes and zig zag stitches.

One day, Rose Mary left Susan alone in the sewing room by herself. And when Rose Mary returned, she found that Susan had made teeth marks in the wood of the sewing machine, creating an intricate pattern with her teeth marks all around the entire edge of the machine.

Rose Mary was furious that her sewing machine had been ruined. She had saved and saved her money and her green stamps to buy the one

thing that she wanted the very most.
And she cried for hours that her teething little daughter had ruined everything.

Today, Rose Mary still has that sewing machine,
But not because it has any of the modern bells and whistles.
She now treasures that old Singer machine because it bears the teeth marks and the memories of a stitch in time, when her little baby girl would peer up at her sewing on a pleated skirt.
She has kept that ruined old sewing machine because it reminds her,
That people are more important than things.

The religious leaders of Jesus' time thought that Jesus and his followers had ruined everything.

The religious leaders of Jesus' time had spent centuries collecting green stamps and writing laws to get the one thing they wanted most: a religion based upon unchanging things.

The religious leaders of Jesus' time chastise Jesus, hounding Jesus and his followers for not washing their hands before eating.

The pure Jewish religion, which is based upon the worship of the one true living God, had devolved into a confusing maze of rules and traditions and laws.

Many of these silly rules and traditions are spelled out in the Old Testament book of Leviticus.

These rules and traditions involved not only the fastidious washing of hands and food.

These rules and traditions also involved a certain code of fussiness about things, with elaborate rules about the washing of cups, pots and even bronze kettles, for gosh sakes.

So, upon seeing Jesus' followers eating with dirty hands, the fussy religious leaders ask Jesus:

“Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”

And Jesus wheels around on his heels and shouts:

“You hypocrites!

You abandon the one commandment of God, to love God and to love each other.

But you hold on to human tradition, by worrying about dirty hands and by washing bronze kettles.”

You see, Jesus is certain that people are more important than things.

In just 2 weeks, St. Alban’s Episcopal Church will once again be shouting out to the Waco community that we are certain in our belief that people are more important than things.

On Monday, September 14, we will be opening our wide doors to a partnership with Avance.

Avance is an educational program for both parents and pre-school children, ages 0 to 5.

Avance began in Dallas in 1972 and now has several programs in different cities in Texas and across the country.

Avance primarily serves Hispanic and low income families, offering GED classes and ESL classes, in addition to their core curriculum.

Ten days ago, the Waco office of Avance received a financial grant to triple the number of people they serve in Waco.

And I, and your vestry, have responded to their urgent need for space to do their amazing ministry.

Each day, Monday through Thursday, Avance will pick up mothers and their children in vans and drop them off at the St. Alban’s parish hall for breakfast.

After breakfast, the mothers will go to the Mahan Commons in our Outreach Center for instruction by an Avance teacher.

Instruction will be on parenting and on teaching children using educational toys and on learning language and life skills.

The infants and toddlers will go to our church nursery for their classes.

The pre-kindergarten children will also go to a class in our facility.

The mothers and children will eat lunch in our parish hall and be picked back up in vans at 2 o’clock.

Each day, Monday through Thursday, we will welcome a set of 15

mothers into this building, so that by the end of the week, we will see a total of 60 mothers, who commit to a semester of instruction. We will also have their children in our building, most likely well over 120 children per week.

Our partnership with Avance is an absolutely perfect fit for St. Alban's. And it is a perfect next step in my vision of outreach.

In addition, our partnership with Avance will allow us to get our hands dirty and to cut our teeth getting to know our Hispanic brothers and sisters who live very close to us in Waco.

I want our partnership with Avance to be an opportunity for you and for me to get our hands dirty in ministry.

Help out in a class.

Serve breakfast or lunch.

And then, invite the Avance participants to join us in worship and study, as we practice the one commandment of God:

To love God and to love each other.

Now, I want to tell you this:

As we open our doors to so many new people,

Our new wood floors in the hallway might get scratched by a 3-year old who is learning her alphabet here.

Our kitchen counters will get milk spilled on them by women who are juggling their children and juggling communication in both Spanish and English.

Our cribs in the nursery will get teeth marks from babies who are teething.

But when we see these things in our church being used for ministry, we will rejoice.

We will rejoice - because we are certain, certain, that people are more important than things.

Jesus does not want us to abandon the one commandment of God - to love God and to love each other.

Jesus wants us to love each other - more than we love our clean hands and our sparkling bronze kettles.

Jesus wants us to love each other more than we love our sewing machines and our cars and our colleges and our careers and our money - and even more than we love our beautiful church buildings.

This morning, in this church, on this Homecoming Sunday, we are hounded by this question:

Why do the people of St. Alban's always have dirty hands?

Because we are certain, certain, that people are more important than things.

AMEN.

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