

James 1 17-27
Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23
August 30, 2009

Botox Beliefs

You've probably heard about BOTOX[®] Cosmetic. It's been in the news. Botulinum toxin type A is made from the bacteria that causes botulism. Botox is injected into your body and blocks nerve activity in the muscles, causing a temporary reduction in muscle activity. Botox is used to reduce wrinkles in the face among other things. According to the Botox website, "An improvement can be seen within days, lasting for up to 4 months. Results may vary."¹

Several years back Botox parties were the rage among a certain segment of the wealthy. Some celebrities even hosted Botox parties. A doctor would be present and inject all the guests and everyone would get all happy as their wrinkles were smoothed away. There appears to be a certain entertainment factor to watching your face and your guests grow younger. The purpose of Botox is to make you feel better because you look better. Of course there are potential side effects and as the website admits, the longest Botox lasts is four

¹ <http://www.botoxcosmetic.com>

months; so before long you are back to your old self and the doctor, getting some more toxin shot into your face.

Both of our scripture readings this morning are about cosmetics; about the kind of face we put on our faith. Jesus is concerned about people who pretend to be faithful, people who make believe that they are religious. James, in his letter to the church, warns that people sometimes confine their understanding of faith to a simple series of truth claims—something limited to their heads or their words. For James, Lip service is fine but the faith that counts is the faith that is lived. For Jesus, your heart has to be in your faith.

Christ our cosmetologist is looking right past the surface into the soul and questioning religious custom. Rituals are not near as important as the way people live their faith. You can wash your hands the right way – that was the flap between Jesus and some religious leaders; and still live life with low loyalty to God.

No doubt some children have read this passage about hand washing and quipped, “you see Mom, Jesus said that not washing your hands was no big deal. These young “lawyer like” minds need to be reminded that there was no understanding of germs in the first century. The main reason that hands were washed was to show

respect to God. Hand washing was not a health practice; it was a religious custom. It was a ritual. It was like saying grace before dinner. It was like offering prayers before going to bed. The issue is not that Jesus thinks that people shouldn't wash their hands before meals. The issue is not that Jesus thinks that ritual is bad or ridiculous. He kept many Jewish rituals faithfully. The issue is that ritual can become meaningless or that fuss about rituals can become the center of attention; when the center of attention should be the Center of Universe, who is God. If you are sure to wash your hands and yet you lead a life that is not faithful to God, then you are simply wearing a Botox mask. Your faith is not real, it is pretend. You may even be defiling God.

Jesus' point was not to make us critical of the Pharisees and Scribes who were debating with him. Jesus wanted us all to take a look at our own habits and practices in worship, devotion and life. Let's take music for instance. This is often a lively subject in churches. You can play the right music in church, you can be pretty opinionated about the proper music; the 9:30 people for instance know that traditional music is where it's at. The 11:00 people know that Christian rock is the only way to worship. We can play the right

music and say the right prayers and stand and sit at the right times in church, but if we live a life not demonstrative of faith, then ritual is mute meaningless motion and not worth the worry. Our hearts have to be in it. Some people are so focused on doing the “right” thing, they forget to focus on God.

James take a similar position in his Epistle to the church. It's not just enough to hear God's word. It's not just enough to wear a label. It's not enough to make your face up in the mirror so you look like a Christian; it is not enough to dress for church, you have to live it. Our actions speak loudly. They show the world. If any think they are religious says James and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. James calls us to be doers of the word. James calls us to put faith into motion and to live our discipleship.

James asks us to picture ourselves standing in front of a mirror. Most of us had face time with a mirror this morning. James wants us to see who we are. Ordinarily, standing in front of a mirror might mean that we see ourselves as thin or overweight, blemished, disheveled, wrinkled, or scarred. “Man do I need some Botox”. Or maybe we are intoxicated with our good looks and witty smile; “you

gorgeous creature you.” But that is not his point. James would have us see ourselves as someone who has been blessed by God's gifts, someone who has been brought to new life through the word and work of Jesus, someone who has been set aside as loved by and belonging to God.

When we forget who we are, life typically takes another course. When we forget how much we have been given, we forget why we would want to give anything to others. When we forget we have been forgiven, we forget to forgive others. When we forget how much we have received, then life can be reduced to a quest to get what we can while we can. We may find the situation of the orphan and the widow to be regrettable (1:27), but conclude, tough breaks, that's the way the world is.

Jesus quotes his favorite prophet Isaiah and brings up that ever so strident word hypocrite. This would lead us to believe that Jesus was a tad annoyed with the whole discussion about hand washing. The root of hypocrisy the word, is theatrical. A hypocrite is an actor. A hypocrite is a pretender. Hypocrisy is a negation of the authentic life. To engage in hypocrisy is to inject falsity into one's life. Hypocrisy is in fact, a denial of the authentic self. Religious hypocrisy

is often destructive, in that it uses sacred teachings about truth to elevate self deception. Sometimes people use moral posturing to sidestep the teachings of God altogether. Getting back to our example about music, I have heard all kinds of value statements made about what kind of music is proper for worship. The debate rages on, people claiming the moral high ground in both camps, in many cases people defile themselves with preposterous claims; not so much here at Ark and Dove but out there in the wide church world - and I remain solidly certain that God doesn't give a rat's tale about contemporary verses traditional music. If the music helps you worship God and find your spiritual center, then I'm sure it's fine with God.

We were talking about the Health Care Reform debate at the Deacons meeting the other night. We didn't use the word hypocrite but we were agreeing that the debate on the national media fronts has been, combative, manipulative and off putting. There seems to be an awful lot of hyped up drama. Using Jesus' word – people defile themselves by espousing nonsense. A couple of things we need to remember about health care and the Christian faith: God calls us to take of the orphan, the widow and the alien; we call that

mission and God calls us to be good stewards of our resources. If there are 45 million uninsured people in our nation, then God is calling us to take care of them. If healthcare dollars are being squandered by, mismanagement, poor consumer choices, wealthy corporations, unnecessary lawsuits and inefficiency; then God is calling us to be better stewards. A Christian who doesn't keep these values in balance, could be subject to wear the label hypocrite.

Torture has been very much in the news as well. Our Nation's Attorney General has appointed a special investigator to look into the "interrogation techniques" and incarceration practices of our government over the past eight years. Since former President Bush and former Vice President Cheney obviously encouraged these harsh techniques and in fact torture, I am not sure how helpful this investigation will be to our nation. It happened in a time of panic; I hope we can learn from it. However, when an elected official of a democracy continues to portray torture as moral, speaks of cruelty to human beings as "national security," calls tactics such as waterboarding "lawful, skillful and entirely honorable" you have on your hands a supreme case of hypocrisy. To defend torture is to inject toxin into our moral fiber. Any of us who cherish democracy

and religious freedom should be scared silly to the core, because Mr. Cheney has crucified the very values upon which this nation was founded for short term gains and supposed practicality. When we become terrorists to save our nation from terror; we have purchased safety at the price of our collective souls. What comes out of us is defiling us. Jesus quotes Isaiah. "These people honor me with their lips but their hearts are far from me."

When we are baptized like Sydney was this morning (at the 9:30 service) we are baptized into Christ. We proclaim that we will live Christ like lives and that we will teach the example of Christ to the world. When we are baptized we are called to stand in front of the mirror every morning, wrinkly or gorgeous and to see a soul gifted by God and in fact made in God's image. When we are baptized we promise not to pretend but to live as people who do not defile. It is not the things going into us that defile, it is what comes out of us.