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*Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA*

*Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost*

*August 29, 2021*

*Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9; Ps. 15; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23*

Several years ago, I spent a week at the Grunewald Guild, an art and faith retreat center near Leavenworth, to learn how to make pottery. I definitely would not call myself a potter, but I did manage to make a few things (with some significant help from my teacher).

What I learned most when you throw pots on a wheel is how important it is for the clay to be centered before you shape it. In fact, centering the clay is *the most* important part of creating pottery. Potters do it in different ways, but essentially you throw a lump of clay on the center of the wheel and use the heel of one hand to push the side while the other hand pushes down as the wheel spins so that the clay is even and there is no wobbling of the clay to any side before you pull up the walls of whatever type of pot you are making.

I remember when I was still learning to center my clay and didn't get it quite right that when I tried to pull up the walls of the bowl or cup I was making it would be totally misshapen, or would just flop over on the wheel and I had to start all over again.

If clay loses its center, you cannot shape the pottery. And if you try to create something without centering it first, it most certainly will be misshapen and unusable.

Today the scripture passages we heard aren't about God being the potter and us being the clay, even though Isaiah 64 does say that. But what we heard today from scripture does relate to the idea that just like pottery, if we lose our center, we cannot be shaped as God intends. If our lives, our faith are not centered, we can't even be generous and pour out our lives in generosity as God desires.

In the gospel today Jesus is confronted by the law-keeping, rule-abiding Pharisees who voice their opposition to his disciples eating with unwashed hands. Now, granted, I think we would probably agree with the Pharisees

that washing your hands before eating is a healthy thing to do, and we might even disagree with Jesus that there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile. But the point of this gospel story is that Jesus sees that the Pharisees have lost their center. "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me," Jesus told them, quoting Isaiah. They are more concerned about human tradition than about the commandments of God. They are off center, and therefore their faith is misshapen. Jesus even names what it looks like when their faith is off center: evil intentions come from their heart, like fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly.

Notice here that Jesus isn't blaming those things for defiling someone, but he's telling the Pharisees and the crowds that because their hearts are off center, because they are more concerned about tradition than they are about the active, living presence of God, that their heart produces those things. Jesus is saying, it all comes back to your center. Where and how you are centered has everything to do with whether your life will be shaped as God intends it to be or not.

In the same way, the reading we heard today from James illustrates what it looks like when we have lost our center. You might remember that Martin Luther really didn't like the book of James because of James' focus on justification by works rather than by grace. But James also paints a helpful picture of what a centered life looks like. The newest *Living Lutheran* magazine has a great article about the book of James stressing the importance of one's character...one's Christ-centered identity and how that centeredness is reflected in what one says and does.

If the heart isn't centered on God, James says, you are only a hearer of the word, and not a doer. If your heart is off center and not filled with the implanted word of God, it may instead be filled with anger or wickedness. And anger, James says, does not produce God's righteousness.

But perhaps even more tragic, according to James, is that a heart that is not centered means that one's religion is worthless. James makes it clear in the first and last verses of this passage that generosity and religion that is pure and undefiled comes from God. With uncentered hearts, we fail to care for the most vulnerable—the people God cares about the most—and we fail to be generous. If, according to James, every generous act of giving is from

above coming down from the Father, when we fail to be generous, when we fail to care for orphans and widows and those among us who are most vulnerable, then it means our hearts are off center, and God cannot shape us into the generous people God so desires.

So, how's your center doing? I'm guessing you can usually tell when you're feeling off-center, when your life, your faith, is misshapen. If now is one of those times, I encourage you to take advantage of the things that can recenter you. Ask me to be paired with a Stephen Minister who will listen to you and pray with you for your faith to be centered. Come to worship on Wednesdays at 12:15pm (or noon starting on Sept. 8) in the sanctuary. Get involved in the work of committees and groups and task forces at church to expand your heart so that it can be centered in the places God desires.

Rally Sunday is coming up in 2 weeks when we will start our youth and adult education back up. Adults, take advantage of the Bible and book studies which we will be holding twice a week to center your heart where it needs to be. Parents, commit this year to bringing your children regularly to Godly Play and our new Children's Choir to center their young lives in God's word. And eighth–twelfth graders, I really encourage you to come on September 12 to hear from Tamar about the ELCA Youth Gathering next summer. There is nothing more life-giving and heart-centering than the experience of worshiping, playing, and serving with 30,000 other Lutheran youth over a week in the summer.

And most importantly, pray. In fact, there's a form of prayer called Centering Prayer—you can Google it to find out how to do it. Because a heart centered on God can be shaped into a beautiful, generous life. Amen.