

Back when I was in dental school, before we treated actual real live human beings, we practiced our craft in the dental lab, on plastic mannequins. The hardest thing for us to do was to make a perfect gold crown for these plastic teeth suffering from plastic tooth decay. And the most important part of making a gold crown was the fit at the base at the tooth. The fit of the crown at the margin had to be perfect so that no bacteria – not even one on a low carb diet – could squeeze through to create decay. This did not always happen... And there were times where the fit of the crown resembled the fit of a size eight shoe on a size five foot. On those occasions it was not unusual for us dental students to resort to the old polishing set. Just make that gold shine from here to Topeka and you will be O.K. If I make it glisten on the outside maybe the professor will not see the glaring problems with the margins. I know; I'm not proud. And I know it's not very comforting to those of us with gold crowns in our mouths right now, but I assure you we fooled no one; and we never resorted to this strategy when it came to real people and their teeth. We were just ambitious dental students in the lab looking for a good grade. We even had a saying for this unfortunate tactic: "If you can't make it right, make it bright."

I can't help but think of this saying – and our questionable behavior – whenever I hear this morning's gospel reading. After a five-week journey into John's gospel – exploring the meaning of Jesus as the Bread of Life – we now return to Mark's gospel in the midst of controversy. The Pharisees and Jesus are at it again, and this time it is all about shiny surfaces. The Pharisees are concerned that the followers of Jesus are not washing their hands before they eat. This opposes the "tradition of the elders," they say, so that the disciples are defiling themselves. They are becoming "unholy" by taking in food in an "unholy" manner.

Holiness seems to be the issue at hand. For the Pharisees strict adherence to the law was the basis for one's relationship with God, and the vast majority of the laws they obeyed had to do with "purity and holiness" codes: eating the right foods, wearing the right clothing, working in the right manner, etc. Now these laws were intended to be an expression of one's devotion to God. They were intended to be outward signs of an inward transformation. But the danger in such observances was that these same laws could be used to glorify oneself. The greater the number of the laws one keeps, and the stricter the adherence, the greater the glory one wins from one's peers. The law then becomes one's own personal polishing machine. "Just look at my shine. Don't look at my margins. Look at my shine." Used in this manner the laws become disconnected from any inner transformation, and indeed become a barrier between God and God's children. No wonder Jesus was so upset with the Pharisees. And you can especially hear Jesus seething at the mention of the "tradition of the elders." This tradition is a human creation, Jesus declares, created to meet human needs for power and prestige. The literal translation of the word "tradition" in the Greek means "to hold in one's fist." Jesus will have none of this, and he makes a very clear distinction between what comes of God, and what comes of human invention. Humankind alone can only touch our surface, "make us bright." God alone touches our heart, "making us right."

All too often however we seek only the bright, only the glory, ignoring the interior. And our culture is absolutely great at cranking out the surface sheen, the bling. (Nickelodeon ad: "Comet to K-Mart: We've got your bling"). It is what we want. We want the make-over. When we keep layering on new surface after new surface – I just need one more fresh coat of paint – we are ignoring the place of God, which lies deep within. And after a while the burden of this layering can become overwhelming and paralyzing.

It has been many years since I last read Dante's *Inferno*, well over twenty. But I am haunted by one of the images from this book: Dante's description of the ring of hell devoted to the hypocrites. Here Dante describes men and women who are moving along a very narrow path, walking in a circle. Perhaps trudging is a better word, because they move with such slow agony that it appears that they carry the weight of the world on their shoulders. What weighs them down however is the garment that they are wearing. They are draped with a great hooded cape that extends to the floor. The hood is so large they can only see a few feet ahead. The garment is gloriously gilded with bright, shining gold on the outside. But the gold is only gilding – about 1 mm in thickness. The bulk of the thickness of the garment is lead. Shiny on the outside, dull and lifeless – indeed life-draining – on the inside.

The genius of Dante is that his imagery translates as well into our daily existence as it did in his own day. We don't have to look too far to see neighbors, family, or friends who walk this walk. The fact that this image remains with me to this day speaks of my own familiarity with this fatal circuit. You may find that you have in the past, or currently now, tread these heavy steps. I suspect that we all find ourselves in that place at one time or another. But Jesus did not come to condemn us to such a lifeless existence. He came to make us aware of our sin, of where we turn away from relationship with God, and to heal us from the inside out. Jesus really doesn't care about the surface. He ate with prostitutes, tax collectors, lepers, and other "sinners." The Bread of Life ATE with them, not to leave them as they were – or to give them a make-over – but to transform and give them his life. Jesus is all about life, the life that is found deep within. In our gospel reading Jesus speaks quite a bit about the heart. In the Jewish understanding the heart is the seat of our true nature. The heart is the place where our relationship with God is nurtured, enriched, realized. And the heart then becomes the source from which our love for others flows. Attend to the heart, Jesus tells us. Become right with God; bright will follow.

There is another image that is never far from me, a balancing image, an image of grace, an image about how we might attend to the heart, and to the Christ that dwells deeply within. Tomorrow the Episcopal church celebrates the life and ministry of Aidan, who was instrumental in bringing Christianity to northeastern England in the 7th century. My image is that of the island Lindisfarne, where Aidan built a monastery that became his holy refuge. Aidan spent the majority of his life out among the English pagans to whom he brought the good news of God's love. Yet he frequently returned to Lindisfarne to attend to his relationship with God, through prayer and the monastic community. Now you have to know this about Lindisfarne, it is a place with a dual personality. Lindisfarne is an island, completely surrounded by water, but not all of the time. Back in Aidan's day, twice daily – during low tide – a narrow walkway would emerge from the receding waters, connecting Lindisfarne to the mainland of England. Today what emerges after high tide is a much more modern "drive-able" causeway. But I just love this image of Lindisfarne. I love Lindisfarne's way of being, a way of being both connected and separated. I love the tidal rhythm of disengagement and reunification, and the way that Aidan used this rhythm, making it his own. What if each of us were to create our own Lindisfarne in our lives? Rather than devoting ourselves to the circular walk of creating a glistening surface, what if we sought to create time – island time – devoted to nurturing the image of God that we were created to be? What if twice a day we were to hang a sign on the door of our busy lives that reads: "Do not disturb. High Tide." This could be time devoted to prayer, listening to God, expressing to the source of all compassion our needs, our fears, our love. What if each week we were to carve out a "high tide" time where we engage with our brothers and sisters in Christ, learning from one another how to walk the walk of God's love? Opportunities for Christian formation and ministry

abound here at St. Gabe's, and whether you are 5, 35, or 85 we all need the fellowship of a community of faith to grow in Christ's love.

I am here describing the Lindisfarne within. But with this necessarily exists the "low tide" walkway, intimately connected to a world populated with a vast array of gods and idols and polishing kits, a world desperately in need of the healing love Christ gives. We must cross this walkway daily, and attend to the heart of our world as well. If the "high tide" is about nurturing the Light of Christ within us then the "low tide" must be about sharing that light with those who know only darkness.

God did not create us to be bling. God has created us to be agents of peculiar brightness, glowing with the light of Christ that comes from within. This is the true light of life and love. May we have the grace and courage to grow in this love, transformed and transforming, all shiny and bright and right with God.