

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT
Sermon for Pentecost 19A, Proper 23-Phil. 4:1-9
LPC, 10/15/17

I'm sure you are familiar with the expression, "You are what you eat." What this expression, means, of course, is that whatever you put inside your body, food, drink, drugs, tobacco, or anything else, affects your entire being: not only your body, but your mind and spirit. What you eat literally becomes, through your metabolism, what you are.

What today's passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians suggests to me is that we are not just what we eat, but what we think, what we attend to, what we spend time with. St. Paul says this very positively: "Whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you."

When I say St. Paul states this positively, what I mean is that he is saying that the person who contemplates good things will experience the nearness of the God of peace. He does not say, explicitly at least, "Keep your mind out of the gutter, or you will not know peace."

However, St. Paul does implicitly say this. In referring to the two women Euodia and Syntyche, Paul indicates that they do not at present know peace. Paul urges the friends of these women to help them through their troubles, while assuring them all that Euodia and Syntyche are still somehow in a state of grace, since their "names are in the book of life."

The context suggests that Euodia and Syntyche are experiencing disagreement and are suffering because of it, worried and anxious and not at peace. Paul reminds them to rejoice in the Lord, to be gentle and to pray. Paul implies that by doing these things, and by practicing the contemplation of good things, with the help of their co-workers in the gospel, peace will return.

It is logical that contemplating the just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and praise-worthy means we are contemplating things that are close to God. It follows that an occupation with ugly and evil things will take us away from God.

At the same time we know that Christians are not called to be ostriches. Christians are particularly called to minister to the suffering, just as St. Paul called the Philippians to minister to their suffering sisters Euodia and Syntyche. We are, in fact, told that when we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the suffering, visit the prisoner, we are feeding, clothing, healing and visiting none other than Christ himself. So in no way are we called to be blind to what is ugly and evil. In fact we are specifically called to address what is ugly and evil and work toward bringing the world into closer harmony of God's dream of a just and redeemed universe.

We are to dwell *with* but not *in*. This may be a fine point, but it's an important one for Christians. We are not to dwell *in* ugliness and evil, because to dwell there takes us away from God. At the same time, we are called to dwell *with* those who are facing ugliness and evil, in true solidarity with those who suffer, because that is what Christ did, in beauty and justice and gentleness.

In order to *do* what is beautiful and good, we have to *know* what is beautiful and good. And if we spend all our time on what is ugly and evil, even if it's for the undeniable pleasure of being outraged at what is ugly and evil, we will neglect the beautiful and the good.

So what does this mean for us, practically speaking? I've had a number of recent conversations with people who have confessed that they can no longer watch the news on television or read the newspapers because there is so much ugliness there. We also have social media, which carries its share of ugliness. There doesn't seem to be any way of avoiding ugliness.

I think my point is not that ugliness needs to be avoided. As a matter of fact, as latter-day neighbors of Euodia and Syntyche, we are called to help others who are facing ugliness. It's just that we are not to dwell in the ugliness. We are to remember that as children of God, we dwell in the house of the Lord for ever. This means that while we may step out into ugliness and evil to be about our Father's work, our home is with the beautiful, the just, the praise-worthy.

There are two parts of this truth, as regards Christian practice. One is that, when we step out into the ugliness and evil, we indeed need to be about our Father's business, and praying about the ugliness and helping those who are there. We don't just emote about how terrible it is.

The other part is that we spend some time and attention, each day, with what is just and pure and beautiful and praise-worthy. This can take many forms: a walk in the woods, looking at fine art or a family album, reading poetry or even *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, if that floats your boat, listening to favorite music: anything that means beauty or purity or love or justice to you.

Many Christians find that twenty minutes a day of this is plenty to remember where their home is. Twenty minutes a day spent self-consciously with what is good and pure and just and beautiful and God-like, has an amazing effect on anxiety and every-day suffering. That's just twenty minutes out of the 1,440 minutes in a day. Spending 1.4% of the minutes in the day in conscious contemplation of the beautiful and good has an effect on the other 98.6%. I can offer personal testimony to this.

What you take into your heart becomes what you are as surely as what you take into your mouth becomes what you are. If you are what you eat, you are also what you love, and what you really love is shown by where you expend your time and attention. So spend some time and attention with God.

To help you on your way, we will soon, at this altar, actually put something in your mouth: the bread and wine that we believe in some form is the Body and Blood of Christ. Then may we truly be what we eat: the Body and Blood of Christ.