

August 30, 2009
Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost

“Emissions of the Heart”

Text: Mark 7:14-23

What’s coming out of your exhaust pipe? Back in Chicago and other metropolitan areas they have strict automobile emissions standards. Every year you have to bring your car to a testing station where they check your car’s exhaust. If your car doesn’t pass you need to see your mechanic and address whatever problem is causing you to fail.

Brand new cars shouldn’t have any problem passing. They’re pristine and clean and everything is tuned just right. The quality of cars I drove were another story. I drove beaters. They were old, usually running pretty rough, and sometimes none too pretty. On more than one occasion I was forced to see my mechanic and once actually ended up getting rid of my car because it was just too far gone to pass muster.

Last week in our Gospel lesson Jesus was speaking to the Pharisees; a group of new cars if you will. They were all about outward appearances. They were concerned with making sure they kept all sorts of man-made laws and the ceremonial laws while in reality they were hypocrites with hearts far from God. They were like new cars that on the outside were all shiny and clean, but under the hood they were totally out of tune. They looked good, but would never get through the emissions test. And the Pharisees weren’t even concerned about what was going on under the hood. They just wanted to make sure they had a good looking coat of wax and that the tires are Armor-All’d. They thought these outward appearances, obedient actions and temple sacrifices were all that was important to God.

This week Jesus turns away from the Pharisees and addresses the crowd. And He says that all these things outside of a person that make them appear righteous and holy and law-abiding, all of the shine and wax, that stuff means nothing when it comes to true testing.

“And he called the people to him again and said to them, ‘Hear me, all of you, and understand: There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.’ And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. And he said to them, ‘Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?’ (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, ‘What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.’”

Jesus is concerned with how things are under the hood; what the state of the heart is. The Pharisees and often we ourselves are way more concerned with our outward performance, how others perceive us and those actions of ours which are public. We want others to see us as upright, righteous and moral according to the law. But we must remember that in this same Gospel of Mark when Jesus is asked what commandment of the law is greatest, His answer is this. *“The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”* Jesus doesn’t cite an outward action, but the inclination of one’s heart toward God and neighbor as utmost importance.

So I ask again; what's coming out of your exhaust pipe? It is a good question to pause and ask ourselves as Christians. Outwardly we all look pretty good. We're in our pews like we should be, all shiny and clean. After we leave here and go to our homes and jobs and schools and lives we may look pretty good too. We're being good citizens and contributing to society. Even if we've had some troubles in the past, we're doing our best to get back on the straight and narrow...at least we hope it looks that way.

Truth be told though, I bet a lot of us are pretty afraid of what the reading will be if we pull up to that emissions testing station. That's when what is going on under the hood is made plain. Think about it. What would it look like if somebody were to hand you a printed report measuring your heart for the levels of thoughts or deeds of sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness; in general measuring your evil? Pretty scary isn't it? Are you driving a new car or a beater? I don't know about you, but I'm thinking about my 1971 Chevy Impala that was running on seven cylinders, burning oil, and which I couldn't keep anything in the trunk because it would fall out of the rusted quarter panel the first time I made a hard turn! It doesn't stand a chance.

But folks, it is at this point that an amazing thing happens. No, we don't pass the test. And no, Jesus doesn't come in and give us a tune up so we can pass the test. The simple fact is that we are loaded with sin and our emissions are black as soot and we don't stand a chance. The amazing thing is that despite all this, through faith in Christ we are declared to be a brand new car. Not one that only looks good, but one that is perfect inside and out; one that more than runs smoothly, one that runs perfectly green so to speak, with nary a wisp of sin or evil or blackness. The report we receive is that of Christ Himself, because we are made new in Him.

It happened when you woke up in faith this morning, a new creation because you believe and have been baptized into Christ. It happened when I announced the absolution following our confession of sins. It will happen in the Creed as we confess our faith in Christ's death and resurrection on our behalf and again when we beg forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer. Of course it happens when we receive Christ's perfect and righteous body and blood in the Lord's Supper. It even happens in the benediction as we receive the assurance of God's forgiving grace as we live out our lives in faith toward Him. We pass, thanks to Christ.

So again I ask; what's coming out of your exhaust pipe? It is a good question to ask ourselves because we are saints and sinners all at once in this fallen world. In our sanctified lives—lives made holy because of Christ—what should be spewing forth from our hearts should not be those things that defile us. In Galatians Paul in speaking of the flesh has a laundry list of evil very similar to that of Christ in our Gospel lesson, but then writes, *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”* And in 2 Corinthians we are assured, *“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”*

What we see and feel coming out of our heart may often seem black and evil, but Christ has made us new. We are not the out-of-tune beater that fails. We are the new and perfect model that passes with flying colors. The challenge for us is to daily live out that reality to God's glory.

We didn't come here today because we felt righteous and upright and shiny and new. We came because we love and trust in the Savior who makes us righteous and shiny and new. We came here to receive God's gifts which recreate us in perfection and to praise the gracious God who sacrificed His only Son once so that could be forgiven again and again and again. We leave here today the perfect people His blood has made us.

Our daily challenge is together as the church and in our individual lives to spew forth the reality God has made us—the love, joy, kindness, peace, faithfulness and goodness that God in His mercy has placed in our hearts made new. Be green according to God, the exhaust pipe of your heart having these emissions that are pleasing to Him because they are of His Spirit placed within us.

And when something toxic belches forth because we still live in a world infected by sin? Don't panic. Don't fear the test. The mercies of God, the newness He offers, is fresh every morning and every minute for those who believe, there to make you clean and shiny and perfectly tuned inside and out, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.