*What Comes Out of the Heart*

Matthew 15:1-28

A lot of stuff goes into our thinking about our lives. It’s kind of like the river than runs right by Newaygo. We have a permanent home further up the river in Lake, near the Clare area. In the distance that it takes for the river to travel from Hwy 115 through Everett, across 131, through the Croton area, over a couple dams and down to this beautiful part of the state, a lot of stuff gets dumped into the river. Yet, the river is clean and clear as it wanders by. What happens? The Muskegan River has areas of natural filtration, swamps and weedy areas that act as a filter, removing impurities from the water as it flows through them. That’s why we don’t hesitate to go tubing and enjoy other activities that cool and refresh us during hot summer days. As long as we leave those natural filtration system alone the river will continue to clean itself and these waters will retain their clarity and wildlife will flourish along its path.

As humans we take in a lot of stimulation and junk that flavors our lives, or at least influences how we perceive life and respond to it. But we do have some natural filtration systems within us. We have a conscience that gives us clues about what it right and wrong and keeps us from going over the limit of the law. We have feelings and emotions that help us respond in more helpful ways as we encounter and interact with others. With the big things in life, our important decisions in particular we use our filters to make those decisions and help us decide the right course of action for us.

But there are times when we get confused, when the line between black and white, right and wrong gets blurry. We find ourselves pondering huge questions such as “is it right to take a life?”; “Is it right to believe some other expression of faith?; or “is what we believe the only way to believe?” Those are hard questions to answer and most of us don’t have to deal with them on a day to day basis. But we do have some choice about how we interact with others. Sometimes we do the right thing. Sometimes we don’t. Sometimes our filters don’t work so well and we make poor decisions.

A friend of mine, recently diagnosed with Hodgkin’s Lymphoma, has begun to realize how she has made an unconscious decision to fill her life with work, to become a workaholic to the detriment of her health and ability to cope with her diagnosis. She has needed a supplement to her filtration systems to learn to relax and balance her life better.

When we come into our faith or grow in our faith the filter that we call God gives us an edge to living life in a healthier manner. When we look at the life of Jesus and his teachings we gradually begin to understand what it was that he did and why he did it and our perception of life changes. We begin to see more hope in this world and in our lives. We begin to see with more clarity what it means to follow his ways of sharing God’s love and seeing others as people to love out of our heart for God.

Our best filtrations system is our faith, grown by our active and living relationship with God through the Spirit we are given in our belief in Jesus. We still do wrong things. But as we learn more about ourselves in the light of God, we begin to change. It is through faith that we are transformed into more loving and caring people for the most part. I say that with hesitation because it is possible for people of faith to become unloving toward others who believe just a little bit differently. It is easy to get caught up in the “I am right” and “they are wrong” mentality to the point that they become the “enemy” to be proven wrong at all costs.

So, back to scripture, Jesus is telling his disciples that it is not what goes into the mouth that matters. We are certainly bombarded with all kinds of ideas, some good and some bad. But it is how all the information forms our decisions and our actions toward others that matters. Our best filter is a faith that continues to grow towards God, a faith that continues to be informed through prayer and listening for the voice of God through scripture and little gifts of inspiration that come our way.

When what comes out of us in our words and actions is informed by our heart for God, we are more likely to act in ways that show love and concern and care toward others. We are more likely not to lose our temper, although that can still happen. We are more likely to find peace in the midst of turmoil, although we may not readily solve our problems and dilemmas. We are more likely to be peacemakers in our families and workplaces and groups, although conflicts will still arise. We are more likely to be more tolerant to those who are different, even though we still like to think we know better than they do. We are more likely to listen and allow others to express themselves as well, even though we still have the tendency to believe we are completely right.

As we continue to grow in faith, God asks us to begin to see things in the light of his love and goodness and righteousness. Because we are human we have trouble seeing beyond our own filtered thinking. We have a tendency to close our thinking when we hear something different. And it isn’t very soon before we begin to think in terms of our own sense of rightness rather than grow or strengthen what we believe through the lens of God.

Always at the heart of faith is this tremendous love and patience that God has as we grow in closeness to Him. As faith begins to filter what goes in to us, we find that what comes out of our mouths is purer and more in keeping with God’s intentions for the ways humans are supposed to act.

Our hearts change as we grow. I have talked several times about my friend who was diagnosed with inoperable cancer. As her dying process progressed, her entire sense of self changed. She began to embrace life in ways she had never done so before. She began to love her family where before she just kind of ignored them. She began to desire to go to church. As her faith began to grow she became a kinder, wiser person. She began to love the little things in life, the birds outside her window, the flowers that were brought to her. She began to acknowledge and give thanks to God for life itself. She began to have deeper, more meaningful conversations with those around her. When her husband was diagnosed with and died from lung cancer during her whole dying process, she handled it with strength and hope and found a comfort that made the situation bearable for her. She died as an inspiration to the church she had finally embraced. Her transformation was so dramatic by the time she made that final transition to new life.

Yesterday at the day in the park, I talked about what it was like to hear and live through the diagnosis of cancer in this faith community, and in the faith community at large, all those other churches that made the decision to pray for me. I was obviously in the right place at the right time. God does that! In the churches that I have served I have not had such a firsthand opportunity to know what a faith community can do in the light of overwhelming circumstances. Instead of losing hope, I found new hope and courage to face such an uncertain future. What came out of the hearts of this community’s people of faith was strong and in keeping with God’s intention for humanity.

When we prayed for peace in such a unique way a couple of Sunday’s ago, we experienced the power of God to bring light and hope to a pretty dismal week of world affairs. All of us were blessed by a great sense of God’s presence with us.

Are our filters of faith working well? Are they helping us to be the people God wants us to be? How are we keeping our faith filter fresh and alive? Are we taking the time to replenish our souls through regular prayer and inspiration found in scriptures and other faith readings? Are our hearts tuned to God? Are our ways of interacting with the world around us being transformed? Questions to ponder in the days ahead.