

“Follow your heart.” It's one of the most common messages in pop culture today. It pervades Disney movies and rom-coms. It's a staple of music and young adult literature. It is a message so ubiquitous that it almost seems like a truth we shouldn't even question.

Don't know what your college major should be? Follow your heart. Don't know if you should take that job in a new city? Follow your heart. Don't know if you should propose to your girlfriend or break up with your boyfriend? Follow your heart. Face just about any major decision in your life and the advice of our culture will be the same. Follow your heart.

It's too bad that, in our Gospel lesson today, Jesus says we should do exactly the opposite. Do not follow your heart. It is the source of all defilement. The heart is where we get every evil thought. Sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. Sorry, Roxette, but whatever you do, do not listen to your heart. It will lead you straight into sin.

Instead, you follow God's Word. You follow God's Law. You do what Moses says in our Old Testament lesson. You listen to the statutes and just decrees of the Lord and do them, that you may live. You take care and guard against the desires of your heart, lest you forget what God has taught you. You make them known to your children and your children's children. Do not follow your heart. Follow God's Word.

Jesus isn't saying anything new here. It's a message that Moses and the prophets have been delivering for centuries. But why does Jesus get into this discussion? Well, that's relevant to us as well. It doesn't seem like it would be at first glance, but it is.

You see, this whole discussion starts as a result of an argument about washing your hands. Now, today we wash our hands out of a sensible desire to avoid germs. I myself will wash my hands several times just on Sunday morning. I shake dozens of hands before and after the worship service. I get sick often enough as it is. If I don't wash my hands on a regular basis, I will catch something from one of you. And I will probably pass it along to someone else. Washing hands is just sensible and prudent.

The Pharisees, however, didn't have this understanding of germs and disease. They washed their hands for a different reason: ritual cleanliness. You see, back in the law of Moses, God specified that certain substances were unclean. Pigs are unclean. Shellfish are unclean. Scavengers like rats and dogs are unclean. People or animals with skin diseases like leprosy are unclean. Dead people and dead animals are unclean.

There were lots of unclean things in this world. Some of them they couldn't avoid. A farmer couldn't avoid occasionally touching dead animals. It was part of his job. And when he did, there was a procedure for him to follow. He needed to wash himself, he needed to wash his clothes, and he needed to avoid touching any other person for the rest of the day. It wasn't an overly burdensome rule.

But the Pharisees got it into their heads that they needed to be extra diligent about ritual cleanliness. Just because you don't remember touching an unclean thing doesn't mean you didn't do it on accident. Or maybe you touched a person who was unclean because they touched something else that was unclean, but they didn't wash properly afterwards, so now you're unclean too. It became a sort of obsessive-compulsive paranoia about ritual cleanliness.

And so they were washing themselves constantly. Washing their hands. Washing their clothes. Washing their homes. Their dining tables. Their couches. Everything had to be washed to make sure it was clean in God's eyes. Because if it wasn't clean and they ate food that had touched it, then they were unclean too.

But Jesus doesn't follow this tradition. And he doesn't tell his disciples to follow this tradition. And one day the Pharisees see Jesus and his disciples sit down to eat and they don't even wash their hands first. And the Pharisees are appalled. “Don't you care at all about being clean in God's eyes,” they ask him.

It's a comical question, when you know who Jesus is. Doesn't God care about being clean in God's eyes? Isn't the holy and perfect Son of God concerned about the dirt under his fingernails? But, of course, they don't believe that's who Jesus is. They think he's just an ordinary rabbi teaching people to ignore God's Law. Teaching his disciples not to care about being clean in God's eyes.

So his response must be pretty shocking. Because what he tells them is that he has more concern about God's Law and about being clean in God's eyes than any of them. They believe they can be ritually clean just by washing their hands and their homes and eating the right food. But there is so much filth and defilement in their lives that they have missed.

For they have ignored all of the sin coming out of their hearts. They have had no concern at all for the evil thoughts within them. The sexual immorality and the theft and the murder and the adultery and the coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. They think they're clean, but God sees it all.

And worst of all: there's nothing they can do about it. They can scrub their hands and their clothes and their couches. They can eat only the cleanest foods. They can avoid touching every unclean thing in this world. But they will still be defiled by their own treacherous hearts, spewing out every disgusting, unclean thought and word and deed.

It had to be absolutely heartbreaking to hear this. To spend your entire life thinking you were a good and holy person in God's eyes, only to find out that you are not only unclean. You are the source of defilement in this world. This world is sinful because of you. And me. And every other sinful person on this planet. We are the cause of this uncleanness. And every time you follow your heart, the world gets a little more sinful.

We have more in common with those Pharisees than you might expect. Because the entire notion of following your heart is based around the assumption that your heart is fundamentally good and trustworthy. That if you put good into your heart then you will have a good heart. The Pharisees thought that if they filled their heart with ritually clean foods and a ritually clean lifestyle, then they would have a heart that was clean before God. You are what you eat, so to speak.

We don't follow rules regarding ritual cleanliness, but we still follow the same basic concept. If you fill your life with good things – with a loving family and a good education and good friends and good mentors and wholesome activities – if you fill your life with good things, then you'll have a good heart. A trustworthy heart. And you can follow that heart.

The problem is that we aren't what we eat. The Pharisees weren't clean because they ate clean food. They were unclean because they had unclean hearts. You are not good because you surround yourself with good things. You are sinful because you have a sinful heart. And you can't do a thing about it.

But Jesus can. Jesus did. As Ezekiel once said, he removes that dead, sinful heart of stone and gives you a living heart of flesh that beats with the blood he shed for you.

He washes you with a baptism that doesn't just wash your hands and your clothes and your couch. He washes you with a baptism that cleans your very soul.

He feeds with food that is not merely ritually clean in the eyes of the Law of Moses. But it is holy food. Heavenly food. Bread so that you will never be hungry again. Water welling up to eternal life. Food that nourishes the soul. Because it is his very Body and Blood, given and shed for you.

We, in our mortal lives, are trapped on the surface of things. We touch the surface. We wash the surface. We consume the surface. We can't get to the heart of the matter.

But as we read in our introit today, we have a savior who deals with things under the surface. Who washes us so thoroughly, we are cleansed from sin. Who purges us, not just so that we are as white as snow, but so we are whiter than snow. Clean in ways that you can't be by just washing the surface. He creates in us a new heart. He renews our very spirit.

And with his restoration, we are restored to God's presence. You see ironically, that's what the Pharisees in our Gospel lesson were seeking. They wanted to be clean enough so that when they died, they could enter into God's presence. But they would never be that clean. Instead, God chose to enter into their presence. Even in their uncleanness. Even in their sinfulness.

Jesus stepped into their presence. He did not cast them out. Even as they rejected him. Even as they crucified him. He restored to them the joy of God's salvation through his own death and resurrection. He had a willing spirit that was willing to die on a cross that we might be upheld and given new life.

There was nothing they could do to solve the problem of their sinful hearts. There is nothing we can do to solve the problem of our sinful hearts. So don't follow your heart. Follow your savior. Amen.