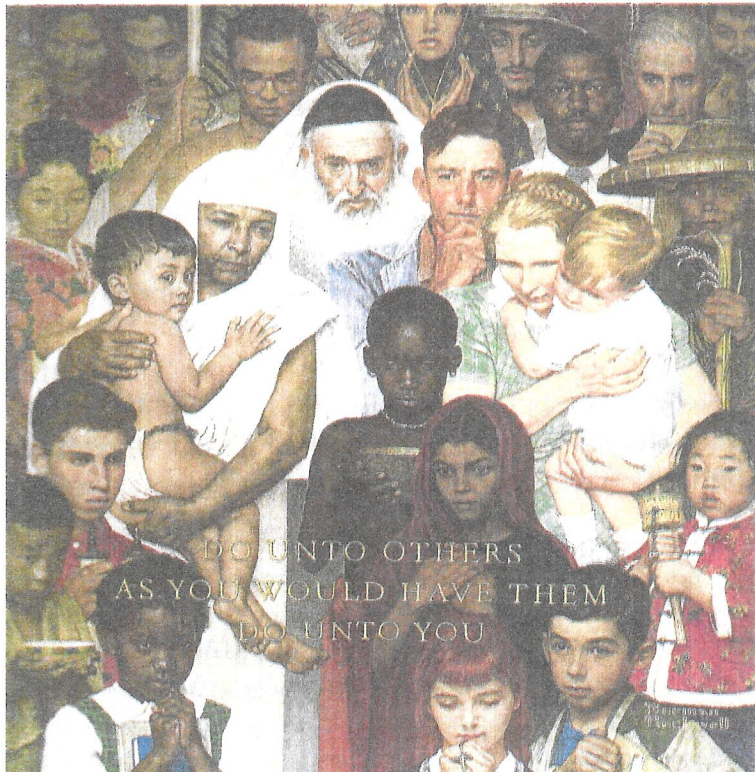


Matthew 15:10-20

Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."



"Acknowledging our Faults"

But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.

Mat. 15:18

In Charlottesville, racism, hate, bigotry, intolerance, evil intentions, and murder proceeded from the hearts of neo-Nazis, defiling the soul of our nation. Unafraid and unashamed white supremacists proudly marched without KKK hoods to mask their identity. In "Confessions of a Former Neo-Nazi", Tony McAleer told a story about one of the co-founders of 'Life After Hate,' a nonprofit dedicated to helping people leave neo-Nazi and other extremist groups. His colleague was being served at McDonald's by an elderly African-American woman who saw the swastika tattooed on his hand. She looked at him, and said, "Oh honey, you're so much better than that" (Sojourners August 2017, 17-19). My hope is that we are. Question is: What can we do about getting better? Might the words from the Lord's prophet in Jeremiah 6:15 give us some insight?

Are they ashamed? No, they have no shame at all, they do not even know how to blush!

In "UnAshamed," Molly Baskette wrote: "We have a shame problem in America. Some of us feel too much shame for things we didn't choose: our bodies and their quirks, our minds and their failings, the abuse done to us by parents, partners, strangers. And many of us feel too little shame for deeds that ought to make us blush: the taking of things that don't belong to us; the easy lie; the harsh word to a child, spouse, or the customer service rep. Still others seem not to feel any shame at all: those who profit from industries that enslave or poison, those who would take health care away from millions, those who enable treason, corruption and greed for the sake of political expediency. The slow, inexorable work of self-justification has disappeared shame from the consciences of some the most powerful people in our country. We have become allergic to feeling shame, and have made it a bad word. But shame, in proper proportion and on the right occasion, is a gift from God. Like the nerve endings of a sensitive hand that alert us when the stove is hot, shame is an early warning system that helps us avoid further disastrous behavior. A carefully cultivated and

proportional sense of shame is a healthy part of the mature spiritual life. It's a strong person who can admit wrong. But when we grow numb to our own transgressions, when we rationalize our behaviors, and locate all evil and responsibility outside ourselves, we can no longer feel the pain that is a natural consequence of our actions and decisions. Neuropathy, the failure of nerve endings to feel, puts us at risk of getting burned. Shameopathy also burns us---and many others---as the whole house goes up in flames' (UCC Daily Devotional, June 12, 2017).

You have heard it said that confession is good for the soul. But have you ever thought of it as a way from keeping the house from burning up? In her reflection on the fifth step in the 1,500 year old Benedictine spiritual way to inner freedom, Joan Chittister commented: 'The fifth step to inner freedom tells us that if we want to grow, self-disclosure and interaction with others are imperative. This step to freedom is an unadorned and disarming one: It is self-revelation, the end of the charade. Carrying the secret of our own needs and our guilt is a heavy burden. This step of humility is the unmasking project of our lives. It frees us to be who we are and become whom we must despite the judgments of others. It means that we must never allow our image—even our own image of ourselves, let alone the image of us held by those around us---to exceed the real truth about ourselves. Once we ourselves admit what we are, what other criticism can possibly demean us or diminish us or undo us? Once we know who we are, all the guilt, all the shame, and all the self-justification dies. We come to peace with ourselves and with the world' (The Way to Inner Freedom, p. 31).

'Every Friday at the monastery in the 1950's and '60's, the Benedictine Sisters engaged in a formal event called, 'The Chapter of Faults.' Following a predetermined list of common faults---spilling water and food, wasting soap and electricity, breaking silence, walking fast---each sister had to confess her misstep and ask her superior for a "penance." Reflecting back on what she learned from this religious practice, Joan Chittister wrote: "The message was clear: Everyone carries a burden too heavy to ignore. Each of us has something to confront,

something that is scarring our soul, something for which we have yet to be forgiven or have not yet grappled with, even by ourselves. Each of us needs someone else to help us with it. Only one thing was clear: A practice like this was not the help that was needed . . . perhaps, but the reality was surely worth struggling with" (Radical Spirit, p. 93).

For neo-Nazi Tony McAleer, it was the burden of internalized anger and shame that scarred his soul. He had an absent father physically, and emotionally, which left him feeling unlovable. To get attention from his father he hung a poster of Hitler in his room. In his all-boys Catholic high school, he was bullied. There he sidled up to and joined the bullies. "It's like being a pufferfish-you make yourself look big," he said. "If I had been captain of the football team, I could have had all the attention, acceptance, and significance of not being powerless or unlovable. But I wasn't a jock." His anger rotted into neo-Nazism where the appeal was asking him to stand out from his peers in the name of something unpopular. McAleer once figured that he'd be dead in a coming race war before he was 30 . . . but because God is good all the time, two caring relationships got him out of the hate group. The first was his children. At 23 years of age he reckoned that if he was to do something for the white race, he should get out of an organization that didn't care if he died, and do something to make sure his children survived. The second came at the urging of a friend to go and see a counselor. As he confessed his neo-Nazi past, the therapist smiled. "What?" McAleer asked. "You don't know?" the therapist responded. "I was born Jewish." In this relationship with a compassionate Jewish therapist, a former skinhead healed his unresolved pain, and learned that he was loveable and forgiven (taken from Confessions of a Former White Supremacist).

Often we leave worship singing: "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me. . ." For us, that peace begins during our time of reconciliation when we get in touch with our humanity by acknowledging our communal and personal faults, and by receiving God's healing grace of forgiveness. Afterwards in our Christian fellowship, it deepens as we forgive the hurt that we inflict upon with one another out of our brokenness and pain.