SERIOUSLY

In Bible Class last Tuesday we read Psalm 15:

Lord, who may dwell in your tabernacle?
Who may abide upon your holy hill?
Those who lead a blameless life and do what is right...

And one woman said, “Oh, dear!” as if to say, “That bar is set quite high, and I don’t think I can reach it.” A man said, “I’m looking around this room and I don’t see anyone who fits that blameless life description!”

A person who has been part of this worshiping community for several months was heard to say that she found the sermons “delightful,” but wondered when one of the preachers would talk about sin and that “delightful” streak would be, presumably, ended. I think we have been “talking about sin” pretty much every week, but in our distinctive Lutheran Christian way. We don’t harangue from the pulpit about sin, as if we’re trying to weed the sin or the sinners out of the congregation. We talk about sin – as did those two at Bible Class – as if it is a condition that plagues us all; we resist trusting God, we resist loving people and earth, and we are called to help each other deal with it. Martin Luther said, “Sin is like a man’s beard; you can’t stop it, and until you die you will have to deal with it.”

Years ago I was leading the first session of an inquirer’s class for people new to the congregation. After a break I said, “Before the break we talked about what it is to be human, and now we will look at what it means to sin.” A young woman sat bolt upright in her chair and blurted, “You mean you’ve got that in this church, too?!” I later learned that she had been raised in a church that had manipulated (you might even say “abused”) children with harsh teaching about sin and punishment. She was looking for a church that would not do that, but would nurture faith in her three children in a healthy way. A man in the class, a long time Lutheran Christian, responded to her urgent question: “Oh, yeah, Lutherans talk about sin. We all sin. But God forgives us and never stops loving us.” She joined the church.

So if you have been wondering when we are going to talk about sin, perhaps in a more direct way, today’s the day!

At a time of moral decline in Israel, a time when faith in Yahweh was low and faithfulness to Yahweh’s law was expressed less and less in people’s choices, the writer of Deuteronomy re-told the story of the exodus and the giving of God’s law and said: You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments
of the Lord your God... You must observe them diligently.

The Letter of James, in what we think was a manual of basic instruction to newly baptized Christian converts, said it bluntly: *But be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves... If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.*

Jesus, using God’s words through Isaiah, accused the religious leaders of his day: “*This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.*”

Each of today’s Bible readings puts a finger on an age-old, perennial problem, a human “heart problem:” the human tendency to live in life’s shallows rather than life’s depths, even (perhaps especially) when it comes to religion.

Sometimes in marriage and in friendship and in religion people just “go through the motions,” avoiding meaningful engagement or connection. “*This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.*” You have heard the word “hypocrite” used to describe someone who “talks the talk,” who “goes through the motions,” but whose heart “isn’t in it.” A hypocrite is a person with a “heart problem.”

Luther understood well this particular “heart problem.” In his Large Catechism explaining the Third Commandment about keeping the Sabbath day holy, Martin Luther said: This commandment is violated not only by those [obvious sinners] who on the Sabbath lie around in taverns dead drunk like swine, but also by that great mass of people who [go to church] and listen to God’s word as they would to any other entertainment [in one ear and out the other].” James agrees: *But be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves,* who have a “heart problem.”

Each of today’s Bible readings puts a finger on an age-old yet ever-contemporary problem: the temptation and even the tendency of humans to not take things very seriously, to not take God very seriously, to live in life’s shallows rather than life’s depths.

Are we afraid? Defiant? Just plain dumb? Or all of the above?

Jesus never called anyone to be a “church member” or a “pew sitter;” he calls us to be his *disciples.* Jesus never sends anyone to “Go therefore and make church members of all nations...;” he sends us to “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...*”

*Disciples* are people who practice a *discipline* their master has taught them; they are learning a “way” to live, the master’s “way.” The term “discipline” suggests there is some need to resist the temptation to live an easier, more natural, shallower “way.” For the health of our bodies we adopt disciplines of eating and exercising which may not be natural or preferred but which, we believe, are “good for us.”

Christians have long practiced certain disciplines to build up their health of spirit, to keep us closely connected to Jesus who is the source of all our believing and all our living. In
his book, *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster, a Quaker, speaks of **inward** disciplines (including meditation, prayer, study and fasting), **outward** disciplines (such as service and simplicity), and **corporate** disciplines (things we don’t do alone, including worship, confession, and celebration).

Here at Good Shepherd this fall we will have opportunity to explore and practice various disciplines.

Three weekly Bible study groups, Sunday morning at 8:30 am Early Birds class, and a new adult faith formation class on Sundays at 10 am will provide some opportunities to grow in some of the **inward** disciplines. That new adult class, *Thank God it’s Monday!* will explore some connections between faith and work life, between being *hearers of the word* on Sunday and *doers of the word* on Monday.

**Service opportunities abound with Shared harvest each month, Interfaith Hospitality Network hosting in November, ACTIONN founding convention on Oct. 9, and more offering growth in **outward** disciplines.**

And of course worship and confession offer growth in **corporate** discipline.

A human body in water has such buoyancy that it tends to float to the surface. A swimmer who wants to dive deeper needs the help of weights or fins to overcome that natural buoyancy and go deeper. Spiritual disciplines are the weights and fins that give Jesus’ disciples the ability to go deeper; they keep us from floating along the surface of faith and life.

The pastor had preached the same sermon – and I mean the **exact** same sermon – four Sundays in a row. The congregation was grumbling. The Governing Board was up in arms. The high school youth, having heard what was going on, were listening more carefully than usual, but giggled through most of the sermon time. No one had ever heard of such a thing. Surely the pastor was just being lazy, too lazy to prepare a fresh sermon every week, too lazy even to pull an old one out of the “barrel.”

The Governing Board President (that can sometimes be a lousy job!) approached the pastor, informed him of the groundswell of discontent, and asked what was going on. The pastor said, “When you people start acting like you ‘get’ it, I’ll stop preaching it!”

That pastor took God’s words seriously.

He saw no sign that the people were observing them diligently.

It seemed to him they were in the shallows, being not *doers of the word*, *but...merely hearers who deceive themselves.*

It was clear to the pastor that the congregation *honor[ed] God with their lips, but their hearts [were] far from [God].*

Well, we have been talking about sin. But thus far in the sermon all I have told you is **bad news**. For a Lutheran Christian preacher **that** is a **sin**!
We tend to live shallow, not deep. That is sin.
   We can be afraid, defiant, and just plain dumb! That is sin.
   We listen but don’t act; we hear, but don’t integrate and change. That is sin.
   We play a lot of games with God and each other, and really should be more disciplined. That is sin.
   We don’t want to take God seriously. That is sin.

Now here is the good news, the gospel!

**God takes us seriously!**

Whether we take God seriously or not, God cares deeply about our life, our health, and never stops speaking to us words of correction, direction, encouragement, invitation.

   God wants us to take God’s Word and God’s words seriously.
   Talk about deep and not shallow, and you are talking about God’s love for us, for all of us!

God takes us so seriously, loves us so deeply, that he sent his Son to us.

   Jesus took us so seriously, trusted God so deeply, that he went the way of the cross – even when it wasn’t natural or comfortable to do so, even when he would have preferred a shallower way of living.
   So come to the Supper today.
   Eat and drink the fruits of God taking us very seriously, loving us very deeply.
   And that body and blood of Jesus will become in you a weight,
   a welcome weight keeping you from floating to the surface of life,
   a wonderful weight keeping you close to God, sending you deeper into love for God and for people,
   a blessed weight freeing you to go deeper into life.