

- I. When Bryan was two I let him watch the first *Star Wars* movie. I could not take watching *Thomas and Friends: Day of the Diesels* another time. The first few times we were only able to get through the opening sequence before he lost interest and wanted to go play, or do something else. However, that didn't last too long, and he has now seen every *Star Wars* film, except for the latest one about Han Solo. We saw *The Last Jedi* in the theater, and loved it. We've let him watch most of the Marvel movies of which he would say *Thor: Ragnarok* and *Spider-Man: Homecoming* are his favorites. And while it's been fun to share parts of my childhood with him, and see him embrace it far more than I ever did, I can't say there have not been side effects. The idea that bad guys might come and get him have led to a few rough nights, at times in the car when Katherine or I have run back in the house to grab something and we took an extra 30 seconds or so he would let his imagination get the better of him and believe that bad guys were going to get him because we had been captured.
- II. So, I have some issues with the back half of this passage; namely, Jesus' interpretation that nothing from outside can defile you. The thought that nothing from outside can defile a person doesn't make sense to me, whether we are talking physically or spiritually. As a person who has battled weight problems for most of their life and witnessed first hands the negative consequences of not watching what you eat it is difficult for me to comprehend where Jesus is coming from. We live at a time when people are self-medicating and abusing opioids at an alarming rate. Our teens and young adults are using them as a means to run away from their problems, and bearing the brunt of this crisis. We live in age where you can turn on the TV at any time of day and see a barrage of violence and sex on display, and then witness a loss of respect of for ourselves and neighbors within society and wonder what is happening. We wonder where the objectification of women comes from when the adult film industry is a multi-billion dollar industry, and is readily available to anyone with internet access. In my Georgia history class in eighth grade we never discussed the fact that Stone Mountain, which is less than 5 miles from where I grew up, was owned by members of the KKK, and that at its peak in the 1920s is where the rebirth of this terrorist organization occurred. We celebrated the 'Lost Cause' mentality that continues to live on instead of doing the hard work of coming to terms with our past. And we wonder why people of color too often continue to be seen as less than other members of our society. So with all of that being said I have a difficult time fully accepting Jesus' word for the people in that day, or in our own day that nothing from outside can defile a person. But not only because of the negative which seems to constantly be our focus, but also the good.
- III. This is a difficult passage for an Augustinian to come to terms with. Saint Augustine believed that through Adam and Eve's sin humanity corrupted God's very good creation, and it is a mark that has been passed down from generation to generation. There is nothing any of us can do about it, we have inherited sin from our ancestors, no

combination of family genetics or attempt to gain the system through gene therapy will fix this DNA problem. We were created good in the beginning, Adam and Eve messed it up, so now we are all sinners working towards God's grace and love, and therefore we must somehow intake this new way of being and be changed in the process. Even the good in life is a change from the outside in.

- IV. I did not always love to read. But I fell in love with a girl who enjoys reading as much as breathing, and so I started reading some of her books as a way of having a conversation with her, and have been changed for the better because of this. And, while I have no amazing 'come to Jesus' transformation in my life, outside forces have been working on me since my first day in the nursery at Rehoboth Presbyterian Church, loving me, teaching me about the importance of God in my life and why God was important to them, and molding me into this Christian that stands before you this morning.
- V. But you see, Jesus understands all this, that's why we can't focus on the defilement piece of this Scripture first, even though that's what jumps out at us because we like the Pharisees and scribes want to use the outward obedience to the law, and tradition of our faith, as a way to distinguish whether someone is living according to the will of God. The law was that the priests must clean themselves before entering the holiest of holies, and over time they interpreted this law to extend to the whole of the Jewish people in order to further set themselves apart from the people around them, and to ensure that there was no question that they were living right with the Lord. But what this became was an easy way for those law abiding citizens to hold it over those who disobeyed the will of the priestly society.
- VI. Before God gave the first set of laws to Moses, God told him, "Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is one, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." Jesus lambasts the Pharisees and scribes, crowds, and even disciples for following this tradition over and above the law which came from God. They made an idol of the law and the tradition. They worshipped the law and tradition and NOT the purpose of the law which was to glorify God.
- VII. In the opening number from *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye says, "Because of our traditions, we've kept our balance for many, many years. Here in Anatevka we have traditions for everything... how to eat, how to sleep, even, how to wear clothes. For instance, we always keep our heads covered and always wear a little prayer shawl... This shows our constant devotion to God. You may ask, how did this tradition start? I'll tell you - I don't know. But it's a tradition... Because of our traditions, everyone knows who he is and what God expects him to do." As Jesus says, through quoting the prophet Isaiah, "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."
- VIII. What Jesus implores the crowds to do is concern themselves with creating a clean heart through following the intent of the law which was to bring glory to God, and in so doing the outward actions of obedience and of faithfulness will take care of itself. One cannot

change the outward results, unless you start with why you are doing them. What I want you to hear this day is that God's goodness already dwells within you, and don't get me wrong so does evil. But when we proclaim Jesus the Messiah as fully human it does not have a negative connotation. It does not mean that he was the epitome of evil; to be fully human means that we are living as God intended, which was very good and in full relationship with Jesus.

- IX. The Psalmist in Psalm 51 asks God to, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right Spirit within me." The Psalm forms the base of a beautiful canticle which reads, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right Spirit within me. Cast me not from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with your free Spirit. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right Spirit within me." At baptism we participate in a physical, outward sign and seal of an invisible grace extended to us by God through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Baptism is not merely a physical washing, but a pledge to resist Satan and the evil forces that rebel against God and to accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior. We understand that baptism doesn't save us, only God can truly do that, but it is in this moment that we stake our claim as to what we believe is right and true. We pray that in that moment we begin to see our life transformed from the inside out. Elisabeth Johnson writes, "Jesus sees clearly the ugliness of human hearts, yet he does not turn away. He sees right through our highly edited versions of ourselves, knows what lurks in our hearts, yet loves us still. He shows us what true faithfulness is by daring to touch those considered unclean, by daring to love those who are social outcasts, by loving and serving and giving his life for all people – tax collectors and sinners, lepers and demon-possessed, scribes and Pharisees, you and me." Our struggle from our baptism forward is to see the need and importance to continue to be transformed, to understand that sometimes that means getting our hands dirty while assisting others, and sharing the love of God.