
Christianity and Recycling!

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler
Proper 15 – Year A

*Jesus said, “It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person,
but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.”*
Matthew 15:11

How beautiful it is to see everyone this Sunday!

It is Homecoming Sunday, there are children and adults to be baptized, and everyone is looking their finest today. We are dressed up and ready to begin the year. You’re looking good!

I love to look good on Sundays at church. Now, by “looking good,” I don’t mean wearing nice and expensive clothes. That is never necessary in church. I don’t care if we’re wearing blue jeans and tee shirts. I’m talking about when churches just look good, and proud, and happy to be here on a Sunday morning.

Let me tell you a story this morning about “looking good.” A lot of you, especially those of you who have arrived at this cathedral in the last fifteen years, think I have been here forever. Well, I haven’t. I served all sorts of churches before I arrived here.

One of the churches where I had the most fun was up the road a bit, up at Church of the Holy Spirit, in Cumming, Georgia, Forsyth County. What a fun five years I had there! In those five marvelous years, we seem to have started most every program you can imagine. We started the first county-wide United Way from that church. We started the first county Habitat for Humanity from that church. We started a preschool there. We started an Eldercare ministry. We started a Friday night coffeehouse, with live music, and where people could actually bring wine or beer to church. That was a big, big thing in Forsyth County; and we were a special hit with the Methodists and Baptists! They loved bringing beer to the Episcopal Church!

But one of the most controversial things we started was a recycling facility. It wasn’t controversial with the neighborhood; it was controversial with our own parishioners. Because, I have to admit, it was dirty. The facility used a couple of long, wire-meshed trailers, where people just threw in their used aluminum cans and glass bottles.

Right there in the back yard of the church! It got dirty. It got messy. And people complained. “How can we have the church looking so messy?” they asked. “It looks like a junkyard. People, all sorts of people, are just bringing their trash over here. They’re bringing their rubbish.”

And those complainers were right. That’s exactly what people were bringing to church. When we had our conversations, I remember very well my response. It was the verse from today’s gospel. When people complained about bringing trash to church, I quoted the words of Jesus, “it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” In other words, “It’s not what goes into a person that defiles a person; it’s what comes out.” Or, “it’s

not what goes into a church that matters, it's what comes out."

Our church, a Christian church, was doing a good thing in the world. We were taking what people considered trash at that time (this was twenty years ago), and we were turning it into something useful, even life-giving; and we had quite a successful enterprise.

It was that year that I learned a new metaphor, a new definition for the Christian Church. The Church is the ultimate recycling enterprise. In fact, recycling itself is the ultimate Christian activity. We take what is old and turn it into something new. We take what looks like trash, and we turn it into something new.

I am not talking about bottles and cans, obviously. I am talking about us. I am talking about human lives.

Is "church" just that place where we are supposed to look pretty and well-kept? Well, we hope people will be on good behavior here. But, sometimes when we concentrate too hard on looking pretty, we repress other parts of ourselves that are worth emptying out.

Churches should be the places where we accept the dirty and the messy, even the sinful. But sometimes we are afraid to admit our uncleanness here. We are afraid that we will be defiled if we don't wash our hands properly.

Jesus said, "It's not what goes into us that defiles us. It's what comes out of us."

How strange that some people are afraid of being honest in church. What is it that made us think we were supposed to be so polished and refined and white-washed in church? So many of us come to church trying to hide our weaknesses, trying to look too proper, and undefiled.

And when we are afraid to acknowledge our own shortcomings, we churches also become too afraid to take in the shortcomings of others. Recycling is what we are supposed to be doing! We are supposed to be accepting the dirty, and even the sinful, admitting it all before the grace of God.

As we at the Cathedral of St. Philip begin our new academic year, as we observe Homecoming here, I have a special plea for all of us:

Please do share your vulnerabilities here! Please do share your weaknesses and pain. Please even share those parts of yourself that you might be embarrassed about. That is exactly what the Church is about. We are a place that accepts you, no matter who you are, or how you dress, or even how dirty and defiled you might feel. The Christian Church is a recycling facility. We believe in Resurrection!

Yes, I guess there might be some in this community who might think lesser of you, if you don't appear perfect all the time. They are the Pharisees.

In response to those Pharisees, Jesus said, "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. ...To eat with unwashed hands does not defile." --Matthew 15:17-20.

I remember one particular child at that wonderful little church in Cumming, who was quite a disturbance. She was twelve years old, and she had learning disabilities, severe ones. In fact, she had something like Asperger syndrome, or maybe even Tourette syndrome. She was often unruly, and it was truly impossible for her to keep still in church. That was fine.

But it was also impossible for her to be quiet in church. This was more challenging, and her mother would often be embarrassed to bring her to church. Please bring her, I said, the more often the better; she will get used to it. At first, of course, people complained about the little girl. She was like the Syro-Phoenician woman, whom everyone tried to avoid, whom even Jesus first considered as dirty and as outcast as a dog. Yet she and her mother still seemed willing to gather the crumbs, what other people were throwing out as trash; they had faith.

And so it happened that it was our congregation who changed. Miraculously, wonderfully, it became quite evident that our congregation became proud of her. She was one of us.

Nevertheless, she did often talk all the way through my sermons. One Sunday was the worst. On that day, she began using a

particular profanity, a dirty word, very loudly. I will not repeat it here, but it is a word that we often use to refer to garbage or rubbish.

All the way through my sermon: "Rubbish, rubbish." Then she would say, "Tell that man to shut up."

Everyone could hear it; we were all embarrassed. Everyone watched me for my reaction. All I did was keep talking. To this day, I don't remember anything I said. I remember only what she said!

I learned a lot during those years! To this day, in fact, you can behave almost any way you choose these days when I am preaching. I have seen, and heard, worse.

I have learned that it is not what goes into a congregation that defiles it. It is what comes out of a congregation.

We are in the business of recycling. I prefer to call it transformation, even salvation. We are in the business of changing lives. We are in the Christian making business.

I hope that this year at the Cathedral is one where we accept and admit everyone. Then, in the great miracle of Christian community, we expose ourselves to the grand story of Jesus Christ and redemption. It's an old story. In fact, it is story that we have recycled, over and over again. When we baptize people and when we celebrate Eucharist, we are recycling the story again. We are telling the same story still again, but in a new way, with renewed community.

We take in everyone, the dirty and defiled, the embarrassed and the weak, the sinful and the unruly. But God turns us into something else. God turns us into generosity: grace, excellence, hospitality.

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