Homily for Wednesday, September 5, 2012  
James Barney Hawkins IV

It was 1978 and I was, as we say, “doing CPE” at Duke Hospital. CPE was not my cup of tea. One-on-ones with the supervisor, small group and “Grand Rounds” which I called “Ground Rounds.” For me it was all just a long spiritual striptease in several acts, a drama I could do without. I remember one day in particular. In small group the supervisor leaned forward with piercing eyes and an earnest which you do not want to see often: “Barney, tell us what you are feeling. Let us look into your heart.”

I paused, leaned forward: “PLEASE. You do not want to look into my heart.” I then foolishly shared more than I should have, always a danger in CPE. I said: “my heart is a dark place. It is wrapped with yellow caution tape. There is a sign “Do Not Enter.” Like the Pharisees and all the Jews, I wanted to wash my hands—not to eat but of CPE.

In today’s Gospel Jesus is put on the spot by the Pharisees and some of the scribes who lived in Jerusalem. They remind me of my CPE supervisor. Jesus took the opportunity to respect ancient practices—even as he offered a critique from 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.” Jesus then offered an interpretation: “there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.” So, “it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come.” Yes, The human heart is treacherous terrain. It is a place of mystery, of love and of hate. Yesterday, in one of our hymns we sang: “That universe, how much unknown. The ocean unexplored.” So, the human heart, unknown and unexplored. Today’s Gospel identifies the source of evil but does not tell us much more. If I look long enough into my heart, I will hate myself. This I know. Perhaps you could be in the same predicament. Let me suggest an alternative.

The poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge had a life-long addiction to opium. His poems represent his decision to resist self-hate; the poems were his therapy. He thought of the self as “an individual circle in geometry.” This circle, this self could be “a virtuous soul” or a “vicious soul”—“a soul in bliss” or “a soul in misery.” Coleridge marveled at the soul’s or the heart’s capacity “of pain and joy”—and for what he called “high-flying notions of love and justice.” The poet wrote: “that I am capable of loving my neighbor as myself, empowers me to love myself as my neighbor, not only as much, but in the same way and with the very same feeling.” Coleridge’s decision for self-love not self-hate.

With his addiction, Coleridge could have hated himself. Rather, by way of his craft, he practiced self-love not self-hate. His poem: “My Baptismal Birth-Day” says it all:

“God’s child in Christ adopted,—Christ my all,—

In Christ we live, and Christ in Thee—
Eternal Thou, and everlasting we.

In Christ I live! In Christ I draw the breath

Of the true life! Let then earth, sea, and sky

Make war against me! On my heart I show

Their mighty master’s seal.”

Coleridge knew what we must practice as God’s children. We must not journey to the heart without Christ. Let Christ fill your heart and satisfy your soul. Let Christ have the things that hold you—and may Christ’s Spirit like a dove descend upon our lives and make us whole. (Paraphrase of LEVAS 118)

Lessons:

Song of Solomon 2: 8-13

Psalm 45: 1-2, 7-10

James 1: 17-27

Mark 7: 1-8; 14-15; 21-23