



ST ALBANS

Yoga Pants

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A few years ago, a friend recommended I go to a weekend workshop at his church. The workshop was on managing anxiety. And it wasn't an Anglican church. At one point during the workshop we broke out into small groups to speak about our personal experience. One woman said: "well my daughter's school made her do yoga and meditation. I told her you just repeat the Lord's prayer over and over again in your head when they tell you to empty your mind." I was confused and so I asked: "why?" She said: "When the unclean spirit comes to the house and finds it empty, it goes and brings along seven other spirits more evil than itself, Matthew 12:45."

At that point I was an avid yogi and sometime meditator. I was annoyed. How dare this woman speak for all Christians that yoga and meditation are bad? But before I could say anything more, she said: "And then I said to my daughter don't you dare say that word at the end of yoga". I blurted out: "you mean namaste?" There was an audible gasp from the women around the circle. Now I was getting really riled up. I then said: "Doesn't namaste just mean 'the divine in me salutes the divine in you'?" And the woman said: "well yes, that's the problem isn't it, you're worshipping Hindu gods".

Before I could open my mouth to say: "I'm certainly not worshipping Hindu gods when I do yoga", another young woman piped up: "yes, I was so sad when I had to get rid of all my Lululemon clothes." Okay what? So I said: "because they're made in sweatshops?", she said: "no, because at the Lululemon headquarters there are boardrooms named after Hindu gods. Thou shalt not worship idols, Leviticus 19:4?". She looked at me like I had three eyeballs. At this point I was just so riled up and furious that I just blurted out: "do you really think God cares what kind of pants we



ST ALBANS

wear?” And she said: “God numbers the hairs on your head, Matthew 10:30.”
PAUSE.

Now, I could use this story as an example of how strict religious practices are silly. That I was right, they were wrong, and see, this is exactly what Jesus is saying in today’s Gospel: “You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition... there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile”. Washing before eating, wearing Lululemon pants, this is not what’s important. It’s what’s inside the heart that’s important, so we can throw all these silly religious rules out.

If I did that, if I preached that sermon, it would certainly be easier. But unfortunately, I’d be wrong, and I’d be misleading you. That’s not the message Jesus was preaching that day.

Jesus was telling the folks gathered, he’s telling us, about where evil comes from. It’s a much more uncomfortable sermon to preach, unfortunately. Jesus was a practicing Jew. We know that not all Jews at Jesus’ time followed the same religious practices.

“Even though no Old Testament texts call for anyone to wash hands before eating... by Jesus’ day certain practices had arisen among *some* Jews.” The question to Jesus by the religious authorities is: “why don’t all of [your] followers abide by these more recent customs? What kind of teacher leads his pupils to violate revered elders’ teachings, that is, the legal interpretations affirmed by at least these scribes and Pharisees?” Jesus isn’t opposed to the ancient law as given to Moses, he’s objecting to the more recent interpretations by religious authorities. He’s objecting to the interpretations because they take away from the original



ST ALBANS

intention of the law. Which, in this case, is about what makes a person pure or defiled.¹

Now we need to talk a little bit about these terms, “pure” and “defiled”. Because they certainly are loaded, aren’t they? One of the ways Merriam-Webster defines “defiled” is: “to corrupt the purity or perfection of”. Now this is important. To be able to be defiled, we need to have started as pure and perfect. Instead of the more loaded and problematic “pure”, I’d advocate to just replace it with “perfect”. As in, we are born in the image and likeness of God, who is perfect. So, Jesus is trying to explain, if we are born perfect and good, why and how do we go astray? Because we do. PAUSE.

It’s too easy to explain our going astray by simply looking at what we do. Exterior reasons, like we’re not doing the right rituals before eating, or we’re not eating the right thing, or we’re not praying the right way or frequently enough or tithing enough. For too long, society and the church had another reason: the way we presented our sexual identity to the world wasn’t “correct”, i.e., it didn’t fit a very narrow definition created and perpetuated by the majority.

On this Pride Sunday, Jesus tells us this is a cop out. He tells us that these exterior reasons are flawed. They’re used just as a human interpretation of what God has in mind, of God’s intention. God’s creation is good and perfect. Our bodies, our minds, our sexualities, our very being, are good. This is something to affirm and be proud of. And it’s something I’m discovering is that St Albans is deeply committed to: a community rooted in love, affirmation, and pride.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-22-2/commentary-on-mark-71-8-14-15-21-23-5>



ST ALBANS

We do, unfortunately, have to get back to that whole evil question. What is God's intention? Jesus tells us that "things capable of defilement...all originate, Jesus says, in "the human heart," which for the ancients represented the seat of rationality and will. [In other words,] defilement dwells deep within"², where we make those decisions out of free will.

Now that's more uncomfortable, isn't it? But it probably rings true. It does for me, anyway. When I think back to my interaction with those ladies at the workshop all those years ago, I am not proud. I got defensive and angry when I felt that I was being attacked. I felt like I was being judged, that I wasn't a good Christian because I did yoga and meditation. I thought I had all the right answers, and I acted out of a feeling of superiority.

If I'm honest with myself, I wasn't trying to start a productive dialogue about how to be faithful Christians in the world. I was defensive and I lashed out. Me vs. them. It's not hard to see how my anger and defensiveness sparked by a few comments could develop into a full-blown ragey campaign against "bad practices". I was the religious authority that day. I needed to hear that it isn't external practices that defile me. It's what comes from the heart.

Thankfully, our Creator loves us. Our Creator knows when we mess up. And there is always opportunity for forgiveness, for healing, for beginning again. How amazing is that? And what's most amazing is that forgiveness, healing and beginning again is available to all at any time, whether you're wearing Lululemon pants or not. Amen.

Question for Open Space: Jesus says: "it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come" – does this resonate with you? Why or why not?

² Ibid.



ST ALBANS