

“What’s on Your Heart?”

Sermon by Vicar Kevin Tracey

February 16, 2020

Mark 7: 1-23

Grace to you and Peace from God our Creator and our Lord Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

If you’d believe it, I was a bit of a know-it-all growing up. So you can imagine my delight when I read this passage in my third grade Sunday School class and could proudly walk up to my mom the next time she asked me to help in the kitchen with my Bible in hand, to smugly proclaim: see, Jesus doesn’t care if I help wash the dishes.

It was a rather desperate attempt—that didn’t work very well—at trying to use Scripture to explain away my household responsibilities.

And I so caught up in this idea of showing my mother how right I was, I was disrespectful in the process. Not that much different than the Pharisees we hear about today.

In our Gospel today, we encounter Jesus in the midst of his healing ministry. In the portion before today’s reading, Jesus is healing any-and-everyone in Gennesaret. And immediately after this, Jesus will head to Tyre and heal the Syrophoenician woman and then to Sidon to heal a deaf man.

And if you remember from last week, the disciples were sent out, two by two, into the surrounding communities to preach the Good News and heal the sick.

Jesus’s message is orienting outwards—towards the sick and hurting world that surrounds them—towards the margins.

And as he encounters resistance, Jesus isn’t afraid to push back a little bit.

We see some of that resistance today in our Gospel story. Jesus and the disciples gather for a meal and the pharisees, the religious elite, express some concerns. They notice that some of the disciples are eating with “defiled” hands, something that disregards the established ritual practice and dishonors the traditions of their elders.

Jesus is pretty quick to dismiss these concerns.

Which is not to imply that you shouldn’t be washing your hands or cleaning dishes—my childhood self had that pretty wrong...

And I know that’s certainly not a message Joanne wants to hear the week before the pancake brunch when she’s still looking for volunteers...

This is one of those moments that the Greek text proves helpful. The word used here actually implies something different from defiled—more accurately translated, it might read as “common,” meaning something that had not been ritually made clean for an encounter with the Divine.

The Pharisees’ question could be asked again:

Why do they eat with common hands?

Why don't they observe tradition and respect the elders?

When I opened my Bible to this passage to start to write this sermon, I was a bit taken aback by Jesus's harshness. His reaction to the Pharisees and scribes seems a bit disproportionate. They point out that Jesus's followers, who were Jewish, were not observing Jewish law.

And Jesus turns around and brings out this Isaiah quotation and denounces their ways... He tells them—you've made the word of God void through your tradition that rely on. You have distorted God's word and made it about works and proper practice and have totally forgotten about the goodness of God.

Now I don't think Jesus was rejecting tradition or ritual. But I do think Jesus was rejecting the wrong kinds of tradition and ritual.

When we become so fixated on the right way to do things that we no longer are able to encounter God... That's the stuff Jesus rejects.

Jesus rejects the superficial stuff—the stuff that prevents us from fully welcoming God into our lives.

Jesus reminds us that when we let the things of the world get in our way... when we are so focused on the tradition and the ritual that we can no longer encounter the Divine... that is the moment that we must stop and take stock—the moment we must consider the how and the why of the traditions.

When we must take stock of our rituals... of our boundary-maintaining-practices—and wonder how they serve God.

That is what Jesus is rejecting. He is saying no to the practices and rituals we maintain that keep our walls up—that close our doors to our neighbors and that prevent us from sharing God's message with the world.

And it's not just ritual... it's not just what we eat or how we pray... no, it's bigger than that.

As Jesus reminds the crowd, it's not about what goes into the body...

But what comes out.

And after some particularly colorful language about the sewers, and as the disciples continue to just not get it, Jesus again tells them—it's from within... from your heart... that defiles.

That makes something common—gets in the way of an encounter with God.

Hebrew philosophical thought conceived of the body differently than the traditional Greek philosophers. From the Jewish worldview, the heart was the center of your everything—it was from your heart that all your emotions, your experiences, and everything that made you, you, flowed.

So, when Jesus tells his disciples this—that is from the heart that evil intentions come and defile a person, it wasn't something to be taken lightly.

Again, allow me to rephrase our reading:

It is from within, from the very essence of your being, that evil intentions come.

So, what is on your heart?

And I don't mean those little candy hearts that are on sale in bulk now that we have passed Valentine's Day... What's on your heart? What's sitting at the core of your very being? What's getting in your way? What's the thing that is keeping you from fully appreciating the presence of the Divine?

And why are we so obsessed with our neighbors' dirty hands?

This passage is an invitation to turn our gaze from our neighbor's hands and look at our own hearts. To look at what it is that continues to weigh on our hearts and what keeps us down.

And then to acknowledge that sometimes... most of the time... we are looking at all the wrong things. We're trying to interpret what we think God wants and we're getting it so very wrong.

And I look at that list of evil things and certainly can't avoid recognizing a few that apply to myself...

But I want to remind you today of something else—I want to remind you of the Good News. I want to remind you that even though this is where the lectionary text ends today, with this list of evil intentions and a condemnation of the defiled sounding loudly in Jesus's words—this is not where God's story ends. This is not where our story ends.

Again, and again, through Scripture, history, and ritual practice, God comes to us—time and time again—to declare us good. To declare us Holy and Sacred. To claim us as God's own and remind us that we are anything but common. To call us beloved and beautiful. To call wonderfully made. To call us Holy.

Evil intentions don't make someone evil.
Defiled practices don't make someone defiled.

When we celebrate Christ's death and resurrection in our worship, in our life together, and in the simple elements of bread and wine, we are participating in God's story—in a story that calls us Good—over and over and over again.

So, what's on your heart? What's the thing keeping you from God? The thing that feels so insurmountable, it feels like you'll never get through it—you'll never make it to the other side?

What's the thing you don't want to look at? The thing you try to avoid seeing by looking at someone else's dirty hands.

And what would it look like to let God in? To let God be in the midst of this unwashed and ill-intentioned chaos? To trust that God is God and you are not? To claim your identity as Beloved and to embrace the Divine?

I don't know what it would look like—I'm still figuring that out for myself. But I do know that is the future that God wants for us.

And for that, we can say thanks be to God.
Amen.