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"Heart Disease"
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West Side Christian Church

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

Just before sitting down to Sunday dinner after church, a mother asked her two children to wash their hands before eating. Her Son startled her with his response:

"Jesus said it's okay to eat without washing your hands!"

"Where did you hear such a thing?" his mother asked.

"Well," the boy continued, *"The Frizzies were being tattletales on the disciples. They told Jesus the disciples were eating without washing their hands and Jesus told them they were a bunch of hypocrites."*

The mother continued, *"Did Jesus tell his disciples they didn't **have** to wash their hands?"*

"I don't know," the boy replies, *"But he didn't make 'em either -- and if it's good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for me!"*

You and I both know that this morning's reading is not about Jesus advocating for eating with dirty hands. Jesus is teaching and healing around the lake region in Galilee when some "Frizees," better known as Pharisees, from Jerusalem, come north to

investigate the popular rabbi-healer. This seems to be the first conflict in Mark with religious leaders from Jerusalem, but it is not the first time that Jesus has been criticized for violations of religious rules.

In this scene, the religious officials observe that Jesus and his followers are eating without first purifying (washing) their hands. The New Revised Standard Version uses parentheses to mark off the next verses, which explain "the tradition of the elders" that requires washing of one's hands and food before eating. Jesus responds with a text from Isaiah that condemns those who comply with religious tradition while "their hearts are far from me."

Jesus then returns to the issue raised by the Pharisees: what defiles a person is not what comes from the outside (dirt or other contamination that can be removed by washing) but rather what comes from inside the person. What makes a person unclean are the "evil intentions" of the heart which lead to outward immoral

behavior: "fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly."¹

Now, I think we might all be tempted to disagree with Jesus, at least in part, when he says, "*There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile a person.*" Or as Eugene Peterson translates it, "It's not what you swallow that pollutes your life."

I remember in college, going with a couple of friends to eat at Joe's Crab Shack just before catching a movie at a theatre in Dallas. About twenty minutes into the movie, it was evident that I had food poisoning. After four different trips to the restroom, I finally convinced by buddies we needed to leave the movie early.

The thirty minutes from Dallas back to Fort Worth were the most miserable of my life not only for me, but even more so for my friends, who had to make sure I kept my head out the window

¹ Campbell, Cynthia. "ID Check." *The Christian Century*. August 22, 2006. Pg. 16.

the entire way home. Suffice it to say, I have not eaten at Joe's Crab Shack since.

Bottom line is that what goes into a person *can* defile a person. Ask any drug addict or alcoholic: it's the drugs or the booze that's at fault. But Jesus' diagnosis, in our reading this morning, is that there's a deeper problem that comes from within. Spiritual impurity or moral defilement starts, not on the outside, but on the inside. It arises from the heart. Heidi Husted says, "We all suffer from this heart disease, from a kind of spiritual arteriosclerosis."²

In the Bible, the heart is not simply the organ that pumps blood through the body; it's a metaphor for a person's innermost core or spiritual center. "Heart" is shorthand for "the total person," for "one's whole being or self." A pure heart is a life directed and

² Husted, Heidi. "Matters of the Heart." *The Christian Century*. August 16-23, 2000. Pg. 828.

devoted totally and unreservedly to God. God sees, tests and searches the hidden depths of the human heart.

Most of us are familiar with the Biblical phrase, "hardness of heart," used not only for God's people's enemies, like the Pharaoh in Egypt, but also for God's people, Israel. The same is true in the New Testament: it describes not only the scribes and Pharisees, but also the disciples (Mark 6:52).

A hardhearted person is self-centered, impervious to spiritual things, resistant or closed off to God and what God wants to do in that person's life. It is deep below the surface of our lives, then, that God begins a work of renewing grace in us. The real action is not external, but internal. Real Sin lies deep in the heart.

I have been criticized before for not preaching enough on Sin. I realize this is a fair criticism. I tend to focus more on God's grace and God's love because, in the end, those win out over our

Sin. I believe that preaching is to, at the end of the day, always convey the good news of Jesus Christ. And while Christ certainly came to make us aware of our Sin, more than that, he ultimately came to overcome our Sin.

However, I am not sure that what I am about to say about Sin is going to exactly match the expectation one might have of what a “sermon on Sin” is supposed to look like. Most who want to hear about sin, want to hear about the sinfulness of those external actions that Jesus sights to the Pharisees: “adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly.” They want the question answered, “What are specific human behaviors that are sinful?”

The problem is, Jesus says that sin is not about what we do, it is about who we are. Sin is not about what is on the outside, but about what is on the inside. Sin is not about our actions. In fact, the word “Sin” should not even be used in the

plural form. Sin should only be used in the singular because it is within us all and it has to do with only one thing: intention or motivation—the heart.

In this passage from Mark, Jesus is taking issue with those whose spiritual focus is on the surface, who are concerned solely with outward actions and behaviors. He is perturbed by those who have reduced religion to doing the "right things," to looking good, to maintaining outward appearances. He is repulsed by their superficial, skin-deep faith because, as one theologian notes, "Externals are worse than useless, unless the heart is in the right place."³

"Imagine a youngster learning to play the piano. The child holds his hands just as he's been told . . . he has memorized the piece perfectly. He has hit all the proper notes with deadly accuracy. But his heart's not in it, only his fingers. What he's

³ Husted, *Ibid.*

playing is a sort of music, but nothing that will start voices singing or feet tapping."

When we think of Sin, we typically think of behaviors or actions: addiction, sexual promiscuity, theft, lying, cheating—most Christians would label these behaviors “sins.” It is just easier for us to make things black and white: one behavior is moral, one behavior is immoral.

However, if we listen to Jesus’ words closely in this text, if we acknowledge that Sin comes from the heart, then Sin no longer is as black and white. Is the person who volunteers at Church because they like to look good or because they want to include it on a resume, is that person sinning? Is the person who lies to their boss, in order to protect a colleague whom the boss is abusing, is her behavior sinful? Is the CEO of an insurance company sinning by speaking out against health care reform because he knows it

might hurt his pay check, even though millions are going uninsured because of the current system?

I am not sure I know the answers to these questions, but Jesus says in our reading this morning that Sin is not so much about our behaviors as it is about our hearts; that Sin in is not so much about the external as it is the internal; that Sin is not as black and white as most of us would like it to be.

Perhaps this is why Jesus talks about not judging others. When he asks his followers “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye.” Jesus is making the point that Sin is within us all, that we all have less than perfect motivations and intentions, that we all have this spiritual heart disease that inevitably leads to defiled and immoral behavior.

Even as your pastor, maybe I shy away from preaching on sin because I am aware of the darkness that lurks in my own heart at times. But the good news is: (and there is always good news when it comes to Jesus Christ) God gives us the ability to overcome our Sin. God gives us the opportunity to look within ourselves, our own hearts, to repent for our Sin and ask for forgiveness. All we have to do is move Jesus from the external, to the internal, from outside ourselves to inside our hearts.

Amen.