

8-29-21

Pentecost 14

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

Inside Out!

I remember a particular Confirmation class I taught in another church more than twenty years ago now. All those kids are well into early middle age now, but their class has left good memories with me. We met for several weeks on an afternoon after school. They did several different projects during the course of their class. Some of their work was written; some of it was more artistic. Near the end of their time together, I decided to share some of their work with the whole church so people could be proud of their growth in faith as I was. The building at that church is an interesting place. There are two hallways leading from the door most people use to enter the Church. One of them turns and goes into the sanctuary. The other one is a long hallway that runs by the church offices, the Sunday School rooms, and eventually to the fellowship hall. Most everyone who comes in and out goes down that long hallway. So it looked like a great place to display what I wanted people to see and know about the work of the Confirmation class and the growth of its members.

We had two services at that church each Sunday, one before and after Sunday School. When I finished the early service, people from both services were beginning to gather for Sunday School, so I went down that hallway to greet people as they came in. What I found surprised me. Two members of one of the adult Sunday School groups that met in that part of the building were taking down the work I had posted there. When I asked them what they were doing, they let me know in no uncertain terms that there was a policy against posting things in their hallway. Their hallway was the part of that I was supposed to hear. They didn't approve of the clutter in their hallway. I don't

know if that policy had ever been written down anywhere or not, but in their minds, it was very much in force. I went through the motions of telling them why I had posted those kids' work in the hallway so the whole church could join me in the joy of watching them come to their own understanding of what it meant to follow Jesus. Those two never missed a lick taking down that work. Their understanding of the nature of the Church was much different than mine. A couple of summers later, when some of those confirmation kids were in the youth group, they wanted to paint their classroom in some distinctive way. Here we are with kids who enjoy being at church so much that they want to claim their space and make it theirs, sort of like our kids did upstairs a few years ago. We discovered early in the planning phase of that project that those same two people had issues with our plans. It seems there was an approved list of paint colors that could be used in that building and a navy blue ceiling with silver stars in was not on that list. In my mind, having a group of senior high kids who want to be there is a good enough reason to do something that another group a few years down the road might cover up with another gallon or two of paint, but I discovered that not everyone agreed with me. The outward appearance of the rooms on that hallway were far more important to them than what I saw and heard going on in them.

Some of you might lean more toward those two folks than toward my position. The people Jesus encountered in the story Mark tells today lets us know that those folks had ancestors way back then. They confront Jesus with questions about why his disciples don't wash their hands like everyone knew that faithful people were supposed to do. We've all become much more concerned about hand washing in the past year and a half than we have probably ever been. We still have bottles of hand sanitizer at all the places you enter, and I'm thankful to see several of you use it. But the hand washing the Pharisees accosted Jesus about was not about what we're doing with that hand sanitizer. It wasn't even really about washing hands. Some of you are old enough to remember the old "Wash your hands,

Roger” commercials on TV. That was a commercial for Lava soap, and any of us who have ever reared little boys have gone through a case or two of that gritty soap because it gets the job done and makes Roger look presentable at the supper table. But the hand washing the Pharisees confronted Jesus about was not really about dirty hands. The Pharisees insisted on lots of different kinds of ritual purity, most of which had nothing to do with being dirty.

Long before Covid, one of my dearest friends used to invite me to preach for special occasions at his church once in a while. We would always celebrate Communion sometime when I was there. It was always a joy to serve at the Table with my friend. He kept a wash bowl nearby and insisted that we wash our hands before we served the Sacrament. It was more ceremonial than hygienic, but it’s not a bad practice for us to think about in today’s environment. My friend was almost as open minded as I am and was certainly not Pharisaical in his approach to ministry or life, but washing our hands was a part of the communion liturgy at his church, and I still remember it fondly.

Jesus’ reaction to the Pharisees is not one of fondness. He uses that H word when he responds to them. Hypocrites he calls them. That’s about as offensive a term as we can lob at one another. None of us likes being called a hypocrite. It means that people have figured out that we say one thing and do another, that we put up a good front, but that we don’t do much follow through. That’s what Jesus accuses the Pharisees of doing. They are quick to chastise him and his friends for not washing their hands, but they are not so careful about their own behavior. They do all the right things outwardly, but we fail to see needs right before them. The New Testament is full of examples of what Jesus is trying to help them see: the Good Samaritan, when the good and faithful people walked by and left that man in the ditch, but the hated Samaritan stopped to help; the poor widow in the Temple, who gave the last she had to stay in the good graces of these same guys, and they offered her little in the way of either thanks or help, and the list goes on.

It turns out that washing your hands is one thing. And that keeping those hands clean when there are plenty of opportunities to get them dirty while helping others is quite another.

You know Jesus. He never seems to be able to leave well enough alone. He has just lashed out at these guys who are already turned against him. He's made his point. They're not going to agree with him. But he just can't leave it alone. While these guys are still within earshot, he calls a crowd of people together and has more to say.

I know it's not usually a good thing to disagree with Jesus, but I'm going to have to this morning, at least on literal terms. He tells that crowd that there is nothing outside us that, by going into us, can defile or harm us. He insists that it's the things that come out of us that do the most damage.

I know that Jesus has the mind of God, but he didn't have a degree in microbiology. Neither do I, but I know that this virus that has changed our lives in so many ways is not a naturally occurring thing for any of us. We just had another blue ribbon panel come to the conclusion that they don't know where it came from, but wherever it came from it was somewhere and now it has invaded our lives and many of our bodies. We just buried one dear to us yesterday who most of us can't imagine ever having an impure thought, but somehow that virus made its way into her lungs and contributed to her death. So, while I understand what Jesus is trying to say, and I agree with his intention, we would probably make his point differently because of what we know now.

His point is an important one for us to consider. If we get past viruses and bacteria and nasty food borne illness, and the damage those things can do to our own health, we can get to what he wants us to know, that the really destructive things we do usually come from within us. He gets pretty graphic in some of the parts of his conversation that we didn't read this morning. When people have trouble understanding what he's trying to say, as they almost always do, he reminds them that the things that pass through out stomach do just that—they pass through and go

out of us, sometimes with some pretty unpleasant gastric side effects that we've all known, but hopefully, they pass on through us and we're done with them.

We also know that, technically speaking, our heart is a muscle that pumps blood, and that's all it does. When it works right, it circulates that life-giving blood throughout our body and allows it to carry oxygen to all the cells that need it to do what they do to keep us healthy, or at least up and around. We don't have to be a cardiologist to understand that process. But we still talk about other things that come from our heart, feelings and attitudes, not always positive ones. We all know what happens when we turn our heart against someone or some idea, and we know for certain how it feels when someone's heart is turned against us. That list of actions and attitudes that Jesus lists is not a pretty one. All of us who have lived any time at all know about most of them, either as doers or as people who have had them done to us. We know how hard it is to turn someone's heart. Some of us have tried, and we know how much success we've had. Jesus tried, too, but he didn't make much headway with these guys we encounter today or with any of the others like them. Eventually, they did him in. But he never stopped trying to turn their hearts and minds.

We know that what he says is the absolute truth: that what comes from our hearts is what defines us. And what comes from those hearts defines our relationships. Some people just can't help themselves. Those outward things are what they think it's all about. And they watch, waiting for us to do something we're not supposed to or to fail to do something we must. We don't get many second chances with those folks. Jesus didn't either.

Fortunately, Jesus is all about second chances. Jesus is still in the business of changing hearts. Yours and mine just as surely as all those folks we think need it worse than we do. The truth of the matter is that all of our hearts, metaphorically speaking here, are in need of changing. None of us like to talk about hard, Presbyterian things like original sin or the depravity of the human heart. But they are real, and we must encounter them,

or they will control us. We don't talk about those things much. We prefer to think we've gotten over them. That somewhere between Calvin and the Reformers of the sixteenth century evolution took care of that, and we're past all that now. At least we do until we get honest or until we encounter one of those issues that is deeply imbedded in our hearts.

Football season is upon us, and we all know that that means some of our deepest loyalties and attitudes will be on display for the next four months or so. Those of you who think we're all crazy for caring so much about a game know that you've got issues that drive your life, too, you just don't wear them as proudly as some of us do.

The season just started, and some people's hearts are broken already. Others will be by this time next week. It's still August, but some of us know that the third Saturday in October is coming. Sometime that week, Kyle will send me a video he sends me every year. And I'll send it to Whitney and Meredith, and we'll all gear up together. It's an interview with a student in Tuscaloosa. The long and short of it is that he hates Tennessee! It gets pretty offensive, not vulgar, but pretty pointed in all the examples he cites about why he hates Tennessee, but the Roll Tiders among us wait to see that video every year. Because in our heart of hearts, we hate Tennessee, too.

I know that's wrong. And I know whatever comes from the darkest parts of your heart is wrong, too. Whether it's directed at an individual, an idea, a team, a nation, a theology—whatever it is that comes from that darkest part of our hearts will do a lot more damage to us and to those to whom we direct whether we wash our hands before we say it or not.

We have all learned that this virus that somehow gets into our respiratory system and other parts of our body can do terrible things. In spite of what Jesus said, we all know there are things outside us that can do us harm. Check your expiration dates. Smell the milk, even if it's not expired. We know that.

But we also need to know that what comes from that darkest part of our heart, that part that we all have, can do even more damage. Damage that lasts. Damage that is hard to heal.

That's why Jesus is still in the business of changing hearts. Mine. Yours. The leaders of the Taliban. Whoever Isis-K is. Jesus wants to change them all. I think he's gotten to most of mine, but the third Saturday in October is coming, and I know I need to let him have that too. And basketball season will be here before we know it, and there are things there that he wants from me, too. You decide what you need to let him have. Then give it to him and see what he can do to change your heart. He just may amaze us all. Amen!

Prayers of the People

God of abundant grace, you have nourished us today by your Word as we have gathered to worship in the face of danger of various types. Some of us are still grieving today; we have said goodbye to one who has been a part of our life for a long time, but we are here because we believe this is where we encounter you in a way that sustains. We are grateful for the opportunity we have had to minister to Libby's family, but we have our own hurts that need healing, and we believe that you can. All of us are worried about this storm that appears to have us in its path. Some among us have been through this before. We know what might happen. But we also know that you will be with us as you were with us in all the others. So we gather here because we're not sure when we can again, and we believe that what we say and do here will give us courage to face whatever this week brings. We are also angry and apprehensive and confused about how we feel about the world today. There is little to be happy about wherever we find ourselves on the political spectrum. People are suffering. Nations totter. Uncertainty abounds. But your Word calls us here so that we can be reminded that we have been in this place before and likely will be again, and whether we listen to you or not, you will not forsake or abandon us. And then,

of course, there is the continuing threat to our health. We know that you will guide us through that, too. But we are weary, O God, and we need more of your strength than we usually do. We are at the end of our resources, so we give you thanks that there is no end to yours.

Help us to walk through all these issues and whatever comes behind them under your direction, focused on your righteousness and the peace you want us to know. Hear our prayers this day because they come from the best parts of our hearts, the parts you control. We pray for all who struggle, whether it's to pay bills or to find fulfillment in their work or in their relationships. We pray for all whose loads are heavy, and we need you to show us opportunities to make them lighter. We pray for leaders and decision makers who can never please everyone. We pray that they will strive to do what is right instead of what is popular, and that we will support and defend them when they do. We pray that you will show us opportunities to defend the oppressed and to speak for those who have no voice. Help us not to give in to power and money and authority, but to work for justice and peace.

We pray for all who are ill and for those who care for them. Bless doctors, nurses, caregivers of every kind with strength, resolve, and endurance they don't know they have. Create in us a sense of responsibility for one another, especially convict us of what we can do to hasten the end of this dreaded virus, even when it means setting ourselves aside so that we can all be healed.

Make us willing, O God, to be the answer to the prayers we pray. Show us how to build the world we say we want, even when it costs what we don't think we have. Help us to find unity we have not yet discovered in your will and purpose. Keep us open to those around us so that we can build and rebuild community, so that we can be the people your grace enables us to be.

We lift all these prayers to you, O God, because we know we cannot do all that needs to be done on our own. But we believe you can and will change our hearts and that changed hearts can change the world. Hear us now as we open those hearts to your

power as we pray as Jesus taught us when he said:Our Father,
who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our
daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine
is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever.
Amen.