

Prayer: We pause to seek your wisdom and will within our hearts, O Lord, as we seek to reflect together on Your will for us. Be with us in this time of reflection, O Lord. Amen.

It's What's Inside That Counts

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

August 30, 2009

Several years ago I met a music minister who used music as a means to raise social consciousness. He sang about the environment and race relations and war. This was back in the 70's.

One day he came to Columbus to share his music in a local church. One of the families who heard him asked if he would go to the hospital and sing to their child. He hesitantly did so and a new area of ministry opened up for him. Today Jim Newton and those who work with him write and share music for children who are terminally ill. The intention of their music is to help youngsters think about some good feelings about themselves. Their music builds-up - encourages self-esteem - invites children to see beyond their physical problems and to remember that which is really important about themselves. It's also to make the rest of us think about what it is we believe are the really important aspects of being human.

Hugworks is the name of their ministry. Noel Paul Stookey of Peter, Paul, and Mary fame is one of the people who writes and consults and lends his voice and faith to the work. One of the songs Noel Paul Stookey shares is one entitled *Inside*. I want to share it with you this morning to set the stage for our considering today's Gospel lesson.

Let's say you're at this pie contest - Let's say that you're the judge - And there's lemon and lime and watermelon rind - And one that looks like fudge - But you can't tell which pie tastes best - If you only eat the crust - In order to complete the test - A bite of filling is a must.

Inside, inside, that's the most important part - Inside, inside, that's the place you've got to start - Inside, inside, that's where you'll find the heart of the matter.

Let's say you're at this birthday party - And say you just turned two - There are presents everywhere - And every one's for you - Can't tell which gift you like best - Just by looking at the bow - To pick one out from all the rest - Unwrap each present, then you'll know.

Children are the very best - Each one a joy and pride - Just how we know, I'll bet you guessed - We took the time to look... (Refrain)

Let's say you're at this library - And there's stacks and stacks of books - There's even stacks on top of stacks - And everywhere you look - There's stories about mystery - And sports and famous lovers - To pick the one that you like best - You gotta open up the covers.¹

Two teenage sisters became friends of an elderly widow in their neighborhood. The 87-year-old had lived alone for five years. The girls ran errands for the woman - took her to her hairdresser. They were friends. She often referred to them as her best friends and they talked about her being their granny.

The widow sometimes lent money to the girls and one day she showed them the cubbyhole in which she kept her jewelry, important papers and a large sum of cash. The girls were very close to each other and one day hatched a plan to rob the old woman.

They covered their faces and with a metal bar from their father's toolbox they viciously attacked their neighbor. She later died in the hospital. After they committed their act they went to the home of a friend and bragged about their actions and waved in the air the money they took.

They were arrested and convicted. During the trial, these two formerly very close sisters, turned on each other – each blaming the other for what they had done. They both claimed that it wasn't their fault – that they wouldn't have normally done what they did if it wasn't for the other.²

Jesus thought that such an attitude was nonsense. That's pretty much what he told the Pharisees when they chastised his followers for not adhering to the hand washing ceremony they had come up with as a sign of cleanliness. It's not what happens out here that determines whether you are right with God – ready for God – approved by God. Things out here don't make you do bad/wrong. Everything we do or think that is bad has its origins in here.

Now, although in today's text according to the seventh chapter of Mark Jesus only lists the negatives that can come out of us – that can defile us in answer to the Pharisees question – his whole life revealed that he also believed the source of all that is good is also that inside us. There's no question that he thought the stuff in here (inside our hearts and heads) is what really counts – is what really makes the difference.

His point in referring to the evil that can come out of us was to challenge the Pharisaic and Scribal view of what made us unclean. He called the crowd to him and he proclaimed: "Listen to me everyone and understand this. Nothing outside of us can make us 'unclean' by going into us. Rather, it is what comes out of us that makes us 'unclean'."

Now, I need to quickly clear up a possible misconception of what Jesus is saying here. The Pharisees' washing before eating ritual was not about trying to keep germs that might cause illness from entering the body. This was not a disease control guideline developed by the local health department. In the era during which the New Testament was written it was believed that physical and emotional illnesses were caused by the devil and so this cleansing ceremony was really understood as a spiritual exorcism. It was understood to be the proper way to be spiritually ready to encounter God – it was to cleanse a person so that they would be acceptable to God. This is not a teaching on the part of Jesus against the emphasis in our day of the importance of washing our hands before meals and at other times in an attempt to control the spreading of germs. This was not a strategy to control disease.

Some bible scholars have suggested that the reason the Pharisees and the teachers of the law from Jerusalem were gathered around Jesus that day was because they were sent investigate Jesus – to see if they could dig up some dirt on him. There'd been numerous reports of him performing miracles and healings and that crowds were hanging on his every word. Word had gotten back to the Jerusalem religious hierarchy that some were wondering out loud whether Jesus just might be the one they had been waiting for – the Christ, the promised Messiah.

And so, the religious influentials had sent out this team of leaders to observe – to check out the reports – to see what they thought. Was this Jesus truly a man of God, the Messiah, or just another religious fraud? And one of the things that caught their eyes was the fact that Jesus' disciples ate with “unclean” hands – that is, with “unwashed” hands.

Again, this concern was not about the disciples' lack of personal hygiene. It was a concern for their lack of attention or concern for a religious cleansing ceremony believed to be central for religious people. What they did not do was properly prepare themselves ceremonially for eating.

It's important that we remember that the law originally consisted of two things: the Ten Commandments and the Pentateuch – the first five books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. For centuries people were basically satisfied with the great moral principles found in these two resources.

In time though, there developed this class of legal experts, the scribes, who didn't feel the principles went far enough. They were sticklers for details. They wanted more specificity. They spent hours and hours - years in fact - amplifying, expanding, breaking down these great principles into thousands and thousands of minute rules and regulations. And one of the recipients of their intense attention was this matter of the proper way hands should be washed in order that the person eating would be appropriately clean before God.

Now, hands had to be washed before every meal and in between each course in a very specific way. The hands had to be free of any foreign particle – no sand or mud. The water was kept in large stone jars carefully prepared and watched over so that nothing else was able to get in them. The hands were first held with the fingers pointing upward while water was poured over them – then the fist of each hand was rubbed into the palm of the other – then the hands had to be held with the fingers pointing downward and water again was poured over them so that it ran off the fingertips.

In the eyes of the religious people of that day, to fail to do this was not to be guilty of bad manners – it was not to be dirty in the personal hygiene sense – it was to be unclean in the sight of God. Rituals, regulations, traditions, ceremonies – practicing them, participating in them, living by them was the religion. To do these things was the same as to serve God. To the scribes and the Pharisees to observe these rules and regulations was to please God; to break them was to sin. And that's just not the way Jesus saw it. When it came to the way religion was understood Jesus and these Jewish leaders spoke different languages.

The Pharisees and the Scribes asked: “Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with ‘unclean’ hands?” And Jesus shouted back: “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.”

Now, the problem was not and is not the traditions nor the ceremonies nor the rituals in and of themselves. There's nothing wrong with having traditions – there's nothing wrong with doing things in a familiar way. The problem surfaces when anything we do to aid us in our worship of or service to God changes from being something which aids in our worship or service to being that which is worshipped. It's when we get upset when only traditional hymns are sung or when there is no contemporary music is sung or when familiar hymns aren't used. It's when one believes that they can only worship if the scripture is read from a King James Version or if

there are screens on the wall or if screens aren't on the wall or if one feels they haven't received communion unless the pastor is the one who hands it to them.

There's nothing wrong with a ritual that helps us see Christ – that opens up for us a better experience of God's kingdom. But when that ritual becomes our God in that we begin to worship it rather than the God it was intended for, then we need to hear Jesus' condemnation – his warning.

There were once two congregations in a rather small community that decided they should consider merging despite the fact they were associated with two different denominations. They thought that if they merged and became a larger church they might be better able to minister to the needs of their community. It sounded like a good idea, but ... they couldn't agree on how they would recite The Lord's Prayer. One group wanted "forgive us our trespasses" and the other wanted "forgive us the wrongs we have done," which is from The Good News for Modern Man translation. The local newspaper reported the day after the two churches voted down the proposal to merge: "One church went back to its trespasses while the other returned to its wrongs."

The Pharisees and the Scribes were worried about dirty hands, rituals, ceremonies, traditions – Jesus was concerned about dirty hearts, about envy, hatred, jealousy, greed. He was concerned about love, trust, goodness, and honesty. The religious people of Jesus day thought and taught that personal and social problems could be solved by following the religious rules and regulations – whereas Jesus knew the basic problem and solution was inside – within the hearts and minds of humanity.

One writer put it this way: "Every war ever fought was ignited first in somebody's heart. Every marriage that ever crumbled died first in someone's heart. Every murder, every theft, every sarcastic word, every abuse of a helpless child, every act of deceit, every betrayal is born first in the heart. That's why the law may control us, and we need law for just that reason; but the law cannot heal us."

Over half of the Psalms came from persons struggling to get close to God. The Psalm-writers expressed what they were experiencing in all kinds of ways. They said that God was like a great rock in the burning desert – if you stayed close you could kneel in the shade of that rock, but if you wandered away the sun would strike you down.

And the Psalmists said that God was like a mother cuddling and nursing her child. Take the child away from its mother's arms and the child starves for food and love.

And the Psalmists wrote that God is like a spring of water in the dry wilderness. Close to the oasis there is lush, green life and growth. A few paces away from the water's edge there is only baked, dead earth.

If we are weary and dried up – if we are frightened and alone – if we are defiled and unclean – the Psalmists hold up a mirror to our lives in order for us to see that it is because our hearts are far from God. And once we put it like that, then the cure becomes obvious. It's about keeping our hearts within reach of God. That's what renews us from the inside out. That's what cleanses the heart of all those things we don't want in there. Evil, bad, cannot live for long in the light of God's presence.

In Christ our weary hearts, our wayward hearts, our broken and fearful hearts – our inner selves – come home to God. Whatever brings our hearts to Christ brings us near to God. And all the things we do in the name of

religion – all the righteousness of hands and hearts and tongues, all of it is merely law keeping unless our hearts are in Christ and Christ is in our hearts. It truly is what's inside that counts.

Let us pray: “O God, how wonderfully reassuring it is to know that you made us for fellowship with you. Because of the truth of that belief our hearts do indeed become restless when we are separated from you. For those moments in our lives, Lord, when we've reconnected with you – when we've been reunited with you, we give you thanks. Help us to more earnestly open wide the door to our hearts so that you might enter in and control what comes out. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

1. Noel Paul Stookey, “Inside,” Hugworks: Best I Can Be (1988 Songweaver Publishing: A Celebration Shop, Inc. Production, 1998).
2. Janice B. Scott, “Accepting Responsibility,” www.sermonsuite.com.