

Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost
September 2, 2018

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Isaiah 35: 4-7a
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

“Create In Me A Clean Heart”

Last summer I spent 434 hours in St. Joseph’s Mercy Hospital. I was a Chaplain intern for the summer, completing my first unit of Clinical Pastoral Education.

On my first over-night shift, I walked into the waiting room of the OR to find a middle-aged man bent over in an uncomfortable lobby chair in a sterile room. My introduction interrupted the silence like a hot knife on butter. His tear-filled eyes met mine, and I could have melted in a puddle. What could I possibly say to this man to make his pain go away?

We spent the first couple of minutes talking about the facts and what was happening. Bill was distraught. He was consumed with grief, and I had little to offer him. I asked him if he wanted me to pray with him; he said “no thank you, I have no religious affiliations or beliefs.” But he then asked if I would just sit with him, because he didn’t have any other family. So I did, and we sat there for 4 more hours. At one point the surgeons came in and introduced themselves to Bill. They explained the procedures they needed to do on Betsy’s heart, and that they hoped were going to save her life, but it didn’t look good. The surgeons drew on a piece of paper a basic heart and pointed to where they would do the procedures to examine the damage on her heart.

After the medical team left, I asked Bill how he was doing with all this new information. He was still overwhelmed by what was happening...wondering what could have happened to make his wife’s heart so damaged. She was so healthy. So I asked him, instead of talking about what’s wrong with Betsy’s heart, to talk about all the good things that Betsy has done. Bill went on for hours about how special and amazing his wife is...all the charities she has participated in and her quick wit. You see while the doctors were examining her heart, Bill and I were also examining this kind woman’s heart. The doctors were trying to find what was wrong with her heart to fix it, and we were seeing all the good things her heart had given to the world.

Leading up to our Gospel reading today, Mark’s Gospel has taken the reader through the death of John the Baptist, Jesus feeding the five thousand, Jesus’ miraculous story we all know of walking on water, and finally the healing of the sick. The people of Galilee had heard of Jesus and knew that he was sparking something new, offering a new way of life. So surely the



Pharisee's had heard of this man, and when they saw him eating with his disciples with unclean hands, it was their opportunity to challenge this new leader. The Pharisees were the keepers of the law, protecting the continuation, the legacy of Jewish law, and they would not stand for someone mocking their rituals. So they asked him, "Why do your disciples ignore the rules, showing up at a meal without washing their hands?" For hand washing was ceremonial. According to the Pharisees and Jews, if you didn't wash your hands, you were unclean in the sight of God and would be attacked by the demon Shibta, which would bring on poverty and destruction. So they feared not completing this ceremonial ritual, because it would bring unwanted pain to their lives.

The Pharisees and Jews needed a way to present their religion as different from the other idol worshiping pagan religions of the time. So they created these rituals to set them apart and create order. These rituals that seem unnecessary to us were the essence of religion to the Pharisees, and here were Jesus and his disciples not recognizing this core important ritual. So I can understand from that perspective why they were so peeved with Jesus.

It is what Jesus said after this that shook everyone to the core. You see this passage is so important because of the timing of this event. We all know the stories of Jesus walking on water, and feeding the five thousand, but this story would have been monumental during the time of its event, because Jesus would have wiped out, in one statement, the laws for which Jews had suffered and died.

Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah, displaying his knowledge of the law and prophets, which were crucial for the Jews. He quoted Isaiah; so hear this modern translation of the Prophet Isaiah:

“These people make a big show of saying the right thing,
but their heart isn't in it.
They act like they are worshiping me (God),
But they don't mean it.
They just use me as a cover
For teaching whatever suits their fancy,
Ditching God's command
And taking up the latest fads.”

After calling the Pharisees hypocrites, Jesus then wipes them out by saying, *“It's not what you swallow that pollutes your life; it's what comes out of a person that pollutes, so obscenities, lust, theft, murder, adultery, greed, slander, arrogance and so on are the vomit of the heart.”*

Jesus is asking them to examine their hearts.

Last weekend I attended the funeral of John Ward, the husband of our dear staff member Pam Ward. It was during the remembrances that John's father came forward and shared a moving reflection of his son. He began by explaining that we are all living the dash. When you say a person was born on March 31, 1964 and lived until July 21, 2018 there is a dash between those dates. And so he posed a deep philosophical question that has stuck with me all week. What will

our dash represent? How will your life be lived in the dash of life, because we are only here for a dash? Will your life reflect the purity of your heart, or will it be the pollution of the heart?

I was sitting with Sarah Dziennik, and asked her about her experiences as a child and youth of this congregation. She reflected on the renovation of this space, and told a story of when she was much younger, walking through and seeing Jan Lynn taking the time to paint each individual name here on our steps and walkway. She carefully took each name and painted them intentionally so that they would last through the years.

God took the time with each of you to make hearts of joy, thanksgiving, love and faithfulness. We didn't have to work for it, for we were intentionally created as God's children. Created in God's image. But even if we know that, it becomes difficult to hold onto that truth.

There is evil in this world and evil things that people do, that discourage us from the promise of God's intentional love for us as God's children. Let's look at what Jesus is telling us in this passage. First, Jesus' outlook on the human heart needs careful examination. For example, he does not say the heart only produces evil intentions. Believe in total depravity if you must, but I still think it's worth underscoring that people are occasionally capable of great good and selfless compassion.

Not all mission and service is done to make us feel good; you can serve those in need because God has called you to serve. You can recycle paper products, not to follow the trend, but because you know that God created this earth and called us to care for it. There is goodness in our hearts.

Second, remember: it's not the scribes...not the Pharisees...not the law. What Jesus subjects to the fiercest criticism in this passage is *the human being*. Joel Marcus, a New Testament scholar and professor at Duke Divinity School, notes the concentration of the word *anthrōpos* ("human being" or "person") eleven times in the reading of Mark 7:7--23 and says:

"The basic problem Christians should be concerned about, Mark seems to be saying through this striking pileup [of the word *anthrōpos*], is not how or what one should eat but [the concern should be] the internal corruption of the *anthrōpos*. It is this **malignancy** that chokes the life out of tradition, turns it into an enemy of God, contorts it into a way of excusing injustice, and blinds those afflicted by it to their own culpability for the evils that trouble the world."

And so it is while we grow and develop our own sense of self, that our hearts become tainted and the festering home of pollution. So even if the outside looks right, the inside might not. We can't just have clean hands and not notice the polluted heart on the inside; that is what Jesus is teaching us in this lesson. Jesus is calling us to examine our hearts, look inside and find a home of joy, love, thanksgiving and faithfulness.

I just want to sing that camp fire song when life seems so frustrating and filled with evil, it's lyrics sing:

*Create in me a clean heart O God, and renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from thy presence O Lord, take not thy Holy Spirit from me,
and restore unto me the joy of thy salvation and renew right spirit within me.*

Lord renew right spirit within me. Because I worship you when it is convenient for me. I pray to you when I remember before going to sleep. I teach your gospel only if the setting is right. I make this gift of faith about me.

We are all guilty of this. We are all modern-day Pharisees, quick to judge others for their faith or lack of faith, because we as humans determine what is important in the eyes of God. But it is only God who can determine what is right and good. It is God's love for us that we worship freely and openly, but friends, we need the guidance of the Word, let us not get distracted by what we think is faithful because it is convenient to us.

At the time I didn't know this horrible and deeply sad experience with Bill would ever be of use to me, but like I did with Bill, we need to examine our hearts. The church cannot continue with polluted hearts. We want this church to last, because this is where community is, this is where family is. But if we follow down the road of superficial worshiping and personal gain from faith, then we are at risk of jeopardizing what is most special here. The message of the Gospel.

We get to sing, speak, and pray the Gospel here at Woods. In order to be a witness of Christ's love for those who maybe haven't heard it before, it needs to be from a pure heart.

Are you a hypocrite? Do you hide behind a mask, pretending to be one thing when, in reality, you are another?

Are you a legalist? Do you expect everyone to live just like you do? Do you stand in judgment of them when they don't?

Do you have a defiled heart? What if God were to drag the contents of your heart out into the open today? Would you ever recover from the shame and the embarrassment of being exposed for what lies within you?

The good news is that God is always working within us through the Holy Spirit. God is willing us to live with clean hearts. And so instead of being a one-way conversation, let's be living disciples of Christ...living intentionally, as God intentionally created us.

Look into your hearts right now. What do you find there? Anger? Lust? Divisiveness? Unforgiveness? Pride? Hatred? Deviousness? Or, do you find, love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance?

May God create in each of you a clean heart and renew a right spirit within you.