

## **Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost August 29, 2021**

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

“Growing up, I had no idea why God hated Jewelry.”

This is how Debie Thomas begins her 2018 essay on our Gospel text this week. She goes on to describe how she was taught that her bare ears and unadorned wrists were a visible sign of her wholehearted devotion to Jesus. But all she felt was alienation from her peers, which led her to resent God. “What was the point,” she writes, “of parading my un-ornamented limbs in church every Sunday morning, if my hidden heart was seething the whole time?”

It was only many years later that she heard the history behind her church’s “no ornament” rule. When her great-grandparents were newlyweds, a charismatic revival had swept South India where they lived. Many young adults embraced the simple faith the revivalists encouraged and – at great personal and social cost – changed their lifestyles for the sake of the Gospel. One of those changes was around jewelry. At that time gold meant social status. To have a wife or daughter bedecked with gold jewelry gave them and their families this status. Proved their worth over others. This was true even within the Christian church.

The converts decided instead to live counter-culturally by forgoing that ornamentation as a testimony to God's non-discriminating love in Christ. It was a powerful and costly witness to the equality of the Gospel. Yet, now, the context had changed, and what had begun as a Spirit filled witness to the Gospel had become something else, a Spirit-less tradition that had settled into legalism.

Often readers of this Gospel text treat it as an excuse to dogpile on the Pharisees. "Yeah, those hypocrites! I'm so glad we're not like them!" But listen closely to what Jesus says and you will see that what he speaks against is not the Pharisees themselves. No, Jesus points to the real problem. The human heart. For it is the human heart that has the capacity to take something that might be good and turn it into something that harms another.

Jesus reminds us that it is the human heart to blame, not a particular human. In this way he puts some distance between the individual person and what they do. This seems appropriate since even the Apostle Paul says that there are things he doesn't want to do that he does and things he ought to do that he doesn't do. Jesus reminds us that we each have the capacity within us to harm another human being (sinner). Yet, we also have the capacity within us, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to bring healing and wholeness to another person (saint).

Now, when we recognize this capacity within us, to do harm to others, it means we ought to be suspicious of not only others but ourselves. Why? Because, it is from within, from the human heart that evil intentions come.

Back to the Pharisees - the hand washing and rituals that the Pharisees are talking about are actually in Scripture, they're not made up, and are certainly something they understood to be deeply related to their keeping the Covenant with God. They believed they were being faithful in living this way. What Jesus points out here is that they have changed something that was meant for good and turned it into something it was never designed to be- an essential action for their faith. Like the wearing of jewelry for Debie Thomas, the focus on this action as an essential component of faith had become a stumbling block for others. Mostly because the policing of that belief blinded them to other, more important things.

Folks, Jesus came to open our eyes that we might see things as they are. Martin Luther talked about this as being a theologian of the cross. Calling a thing what it is, a spade a spade. Jesus does this here when he says our concern ought not to be whether people have washed their hands, but with the capacity for evil that lies within us all, within our human hearts... yes, even the hearts of the followers of Jesus. In this way, we should be wary

of even our own motivations and ponder what lies behind them, especially before saying that this particular act is the will of God. Anytime I hear someone do that, especially myself, my antenna goes up. Because often this is not a God thing, but a human thing.

Personally, I am much more comfortable making broad, sweeping statements about God based on the story of God's pursuit of God's people in scripture- God's love for all creation, God's desire to be in relationship with us human beings, created in God's own image, God's desire that we should love God with all that we are and that we should love our neighbors as ourselves. These things, which require the transformation of this human heart, are what God desires from us. The other things may be important, but they become expendable the moment we place them in the way of God's desire.

What might your "ritual handwashing" belief be? One that you think of as essential to being a follower of Jesus, but which maybe isn't as important as you think. Why does it feel so important to you? Is it really something God commands, or is it something that might be important to you and your faith, but not essential to the faith as a whole?

We should also remember that the evil that lies in the human heart is both an individual and collective thing. A group of individual decisions by Debie Thomas' great-grandparents and their friends rolled down to have an effect (negative) on her years later. We know how this happens, how something that we do up here affects what happens down there. Just ask the folks who live along Hoosier Creek about how the work done at the airport affects them, or the folks in Sun Valley in Cedar Rapids who live along Indian Creek and learned what all the development upstream meant to them in 2002. Flooding!

What this means for us, is that our care is not just for our own actions and what they will mean, but for our actions corporately. To look at how they might cause harm to others, even unintentionally. That's on us, collectively. So, it behooves us to listen to what others say with humility and to address their concerns with a willingness to see the truth. Even if it doesn't feel that way to us.

The truth is, the human heart is the source of much evil and harm. Yet, the promise of Christ is that we also have the capacity to affect people for good. To bring joy, comfort, and relief into their life. And this promise is also one that is both individual and collective. What we do here can extend to places and people that we will never meet. It's like those Liberty Mutual

commercials where the small act of kindness of one person inspires the rest.

It only takes one word of kindness, one moment to stop and help someone pick something up, one thank you, one word about how talented someone is to change a life. I'm sure many of us have that experience within our own stories. Of these, often small actions, that have conveyed so much to us.

It is in those moments, that the reign of God shines through. It is in those moments where we individually or corporately truly are Jesus for that person. Where our own walk of faith matches Jesus' closely enough to produce a harmony that is sweeter than angels singing. I don't know about you, but I want more of those moments.

Let us pray, Oh God, we know the capacity of our hearts for evil. Dim that within us. By the power of your Holy Spirit poured upon us in baptism raise up instead our capacity to heal, to bring joy, and through your Gospel to bring life, fuller and more abundant to all whom we meet. We pray this through you Son, Jesus Christ, who is our Savior and Lord. Amen.