

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller

August 26, 2018 Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 7:1-9, 14-15, 21-23

Living from the Inside Out

The story goes about a family in church with three young children. As was their habit, they sat in the very front row so that the children could see better.

During one particular service, the pastor was baptizing a little baby. The little six-year old girl in the front row was quite taken by this, noticing that the pastor was saying something and pouring water over the little baby's head.

With a puzzled look on her face, the little girl turned to her father and asked, "Daddy, why is she brainwashing that little baby?"

There is something actually quite profound – and correct – about the little girl's question. Because to be a Christian is to allow our brains to be washed – and not just our brains but our hearts as well.

Today's reading is about laws and regulations and about purity of heart, mind, and soul. About what makes for cleanliness in the eyes of God and what does not.

But it starts with a discussion about hand washing. And we all know how important hand washing is, don't we? While for us hand washing is all about sanitation – for the Jews it was about much more than that.

The Pharisees in our lesson today, question Jesus on why he approaches the table with unwashed, or defiled / dirty hands. The Pharisees were especially religious leaders, who knew all there was to know about the cultures and traditions of being Jewish. And they were responsible for maintaining what were called "purity laws," - laws that were there to preserve their Jewish identity amidst the cultural diversity of the day.

But what happened was that the Pharisees became preoccupied with every little detail and doing everything just so - focusing too much on the letter of the law and forgetting the spirit. They were so concerned with how to conduct their rituals; they forgot the reason why they had them in the first place - to honor and glorify God.

And so Jesus is trying to get them - and us - to move how we practice our faith beyond merely habit into a deeper relationship with God.

So how are we like the Pharisees? In what ways do we engage in "ritual purity"?

At church here, we can get stuck in the ways we've always done things. We get more interested in preserving the institution instead of sharing the faith. Some changes we've made in recent years have met with resistance: our desire to make our Harvest Fair into mission; improving our welcome by making our hallway downstairs more inviting - these changes have been hard for some.

And individually, we can get caught up in chores, tasks, career, success – and end up neglecting those closest to us. We can chase material success as most important, instead of using our success as a means to help build the kingdom of God.

And, of course, if we want to be reminded of what goes on in an impure heart, we can go right back to the laundry list that Jesus gives us in today's lesson – as present now as in Jesus' time: theft, murder, adultery, envy, wickedness, fornication, deceit, licentiousness (promiscuity), slander, pride, foolishness. There's something there for all of us!

When Jesus says, "there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile," he is saying that it is the heart, the mind, the spirit that matter. Jesus moves religion from an outward act of piety (what we do) to an inward act of purity (why we do it).

It's about being the same person inwardly and outwardly. It's living from the inside out.

But this is not only about what goes on in our private hearts and minds. So much of spirituality these days is really all about us: feeling good, being at peace inwardly, having a positive mindset. But Jesus is not talking about these things - at least not in and of themselves. The point is not that we feel good, or have the right attitude and then keep it all to ourselves and inside of us.

He is saying that what comes out of our hearts is what matters. How we live makes a difference.

Elsewhere in the Bible, James (1:22) said, "Be doers of the word, not merely hearers." Christian faith is about developing habits of the heart and mind that then show up in how we live, and act, and treat others, and spend our time and our money - all of which should glorify God.

When who we are in the inside does not match up on the outside, it's like what Walker Percy said, "getting an A-plus in ethics and flunking life." How we live does matter – and how we live should be grounded in our hearts - and our hearts should be grounded in Christ.

So how are we doing? Are we trying to conform to the laws and the traditions of our faith - but inwardly are empty?

Suze Orman, financial planner and author of *The Courage to be Rich*, tells of her successful career and a time she went through when it was not so successful.

During that time she struggled to save face, to maintain an image of success. She continued to entertain her friends at fine restaurants and to drive her luxury car to keep up the image of a successful professional. The truth was that every dinner, every car payment, every tank of gas was taking her deeper into debt.

Many Christians are like that. We look good. We keep up appearances. But inwardly we are a mess - and the more we try to conform on the outside without the honesty of our heart, the worse off we get.

But what about when we're a mess on the inside and the message is "get your heart right".... Yet still our hearts carry the burden of envy, and worry that we aren't good enough... And we hold onto resentment so long that forgiveness seems impossible... And our mistakes (big and small) haunt us late into the night...

Well, then we really need Jesus! What we cannot do for ourselves, God does for us in an act of pure mercy and love. Our sinful past is forgotten and forgiven – each and every day. We are given strength and courage to get through. Each and every day we are reunited with God in a new relationship, with a fresh start.

Because, the heart of the problem... is a problem of the heart. And we do not always have the ability to be of clean heart.

Living from the inside out includes not always having the will or the strength to have a clean heart. Living from the inside out means leaving ourselves open to be changed by God. It is knowing that, by His grace, God will intervene and do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

And so we need Jesus! And we need each other - to remind each other about all this when we begin to doubt it's all true, or when we are just too weary to remember.

And we need the church - to gather and empower and encourage - to do more than we ever could imagine or accomplish by ourselves. To lift up the name of Jesus and point to all the ways God has triumphed over the impossible.

When Jesus schooled the Pharisees 2000 years ago, he gave us a clear message too: Don't get stuck in a rut of habits that distract from pointing to Jesus; align everything with the will of God; be willing to do things differently, because while the Good News never changes, the world around us always does.

And so we come to church each Sunday.... Willing to let the spirit of God change us - knowing that it is not our works, nor even our purity of heart that saves us; it is through our relationship with Christ where we are forgiven, restored, healed, and changed into the people God intends us to be.

This is to have our hearts washed clean, so that we can live to God's glory.

May it be so!

Amen.