

The heart is the heart of the matter

Sermon preached at the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, Marietta, GA

by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, September 2, 2018

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17, Year B)

(Song of Solomon 2:8-13; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15; 21-23)

Mark 7:1-23 (the bracketed portions below were not appointed for the day and were not read during the service; they are included here in brackets):

*Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."*

*[Then he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.' But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, 'Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban' (that is, an offering to God)—then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this."]*

*Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."*

*[When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. He said to them, "Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, "It is what comes out of a person that defiles.] For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."*

In this morning's Gospel reading, Jesus zeroes in on the heart of the matter. Our outward appearance and the rituals that we observe are not what counts for us as Christians. When it comes to growing disciples of Jesus Christ, the heart is the heart of the matter.

In this reading, Jesus teaches the crowds and his disciples that your character, your motivations and values, are more important than outward, ritual appearances. To be truly "doers of the word," as James puts it, we must develop the right intention and attitude. Without the right intention and engagement, our rituals are a barrier to God, rather than a help. From the heart comes true sin or virtue in our outward actions.

For instance, the Pharisees followed ritual customs of washing to establish spiritual purity. They knew nothing of bacteria in those days. They were concerned with the code of ritual purity that sought to separate God's people from the pagan world around them. But Jesus tells them that purity is not only concerned with the outside world. Purity is especially a matter of the inside world. Purity is a matter of the heart.

The reading appointed for today skips over several verses in two places. In those verses, Jesus explains his position in a little more detail. Jesus challenges the hypocrisy of the Pharisees who follow a strict legalism in their ritual customs, yet they find loopholes to serve their own interests. For instance, they require others to support their parents financially, but they create technical exceptions for Pharisees so that Pharisees are exempt from this rule. It's sort of like if

congress didn't have to pay taxes that others have to pay. The poor are burdened, and rich Pharisees get the breaks. On the outside, they look pious, but on the inside, they serve themselves more than God.

The Pharisees criticize Jesus' disciples for eating without a ritual handwashing ceremony. Jesus says that we are not made dirty by the food that goes into us. Rather, we are made dirty by those things that come out of us: our words and actions to others. In verses skipped over in today's reading, Jesus describes that what we eat goes into the stomach, not the heart, and what comes out goes into the sewer. Likewise, it is what comes out of us that makes us unclean. Not just what comes out of the stomach, but especially what comes out of the heart. The heart is the heart of the matter.

These days our culture wants to see the human heart as entirely pure. "Follow your heart!" is a common saying. We hear that whatever we desire must be good—some even say that since we are made in the image of God, all our desires must be good. But the image of God is broken in us, clouded and wounded by sin. The problem of sin is not just around us in the influences of others, the problem of sin is inside of us as well. The heart is the heart of the matter, even for Christians.

I have heard many people say that they think Christians are hypocrites. They dress up on Sunday and go through their rituals, but during the week, they are cutthroat, ruthless and selfish. They seem to rely on the outward appearance of piety at church, yet inwardly—in the heart—their rhythm of life worships different gods.

I hope that none of us provide such blatant examples of hypocrisy to the world around us. However, all Christians are hypocrites to some extent. Christians have high standards, and yet we all fail those high standards at some level. We aspire to live better than we do now, which means that right now, we are not as good as we want to be. Anyone who aims to live better has this kind of hypocrisy, this kind of failing to practice what we preach.

That is why we confess our sins to God each week and seek God's forgiveness. We do not live the way we hope to live. Unless we simply give up the effort (as is so easy to do), we seek a wholeness of life—a life that integrates who we are with who we want to be and even more so, with who God wants us to be. Living life with this integrity is not so much a matter of external appearances or simple knowledge. Jesus says that living life with integrity is a matter of the formation of the heart.

In this passage, Jesus doesn't describe how the heart is formed. In this passage, Jesus identifies the problem. Our sinful actions come from within us. Sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, dishonesty, slander. All these come from an ill-formed heart. Our desires are not naturally good. Though we may have good in us, that good is clouded and marred by sin. We need the grace of God and the gift of the Holy Spirit to restore that image of God within us.

The last sins on Jesus' list are especially focused on inward attitudes rather than outward actions. Licentiousness is the attitude that you can do anything you want—that no rules apply to you. Envy is the hatred of someone because they have something good, or even hatred of the good that they have. Pride is perhaps the first sin—putting ourselves before God.

Our sinful actions aren't a matter of someone else's fault or responsibility—their origins are in our own hearts, our desires and habits. Jesus identifies the problem, but that just begs the question—what is the solution? How do we avoid such hypocrisy? How can we become, as James puts it “doers of the word and not merely hearers” of the word? How is the heart formed and shaped to bear the fruit of virtue and blessing? For answers to these questions, we must look elsewhere in Jesus' teaching and elsewhere in the Bible.

What we find is a call to walk with God in all of our lives. There, our hearts will be formed more closely to God. God calls us to pray always, to immerse ourselves in God's teaching, and to live each day serving God in our lives. We don't have to give up our jobs or school or families to do this; we can live with our hearts focused on God in ordinary living with an awareness of our intentions and attitudes. The practices of reading the Bible and praying and serving others each day can become empty rituals. Or they can become tools that help us draw our hearts close to God, to think and feel as God does.

The odd thing is that what we do outwardly *can* impact how we develop inwardly. Think about football players. Many players are all show and style—they love the spotlight and glamor. But the athlete that wins the game is the one who is formed and shaped by daily practice, by daily exercise and work on the foundations of the game. Those daily routines can be empty. But the true athlete develops a mindset that puts those physical exercises into practice on the field.

As spiritual athletes, as followers of Jesus, we seek to worship God, not as an empty ritual, but as a way to lift ourselves before God and to honor God above ourselves. We pray not simply to repeat ourselves, but as a way to draw our hearts to God. We read the Bible, not as a check-off of an obligation, but as a way to immerse ourselves in God's perspective in life. We serve Christ in the world not as a way to feel good about ourselves, but as a way to love as Christ loves us.

In the book of the prophet Ezekiel, God promises us: “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances” (Ezekiel 36:26-27). Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; through the gift of the Holy Spirit, God gives us a new heart.

Each day, as we walk more closely with God, as we seek God's presence, God renews our hearts and minds. As we are more and more aware of God's care for us, we are better equipped to care for others. As we are aware of Jesus' sacrifice for us, we are better formed and shaped for lives of generosity and grace.

We see others the way God sees others. We understand the world the way its creator understands the world. We see and understand ourselves through the eyes of the one who forgives us and gives himself for us. We find our hearts formed and shaped not just by our habits, but by God who walks with us as we walk with him.

Jesus said that the heart is the heart of the matter. In your daily walk with God, seek the new heart that God gives you, and day by day discover a life of greater integrity and greater joy.