

“The Real Story”

(Mk. 7:1-23)

Intro. to Text. What do you think makes Jesus angry? The gospel records don't show him that way often. The situation that comes to mind is the cleansing of the temple. But this morning's scripture text is another place Jesus was angry.

- It begins with what seems like an innocent question, “Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders?”
- That question exposed an utterly fundamental difference between Jesus and the Jewish leadership of the day: the question of **what makes a person acceptable (or unacceptable) to God**. Is it a matter of being “clean” ceremonially, washing hands and washing dishes, or is it internal, a matter of being “clean” at the center of our being, what Jesus calls “the human heart?”
- Jesus condemns the Jewish leader's teaching. He says they teach their own ideas as doctrines of God. That leads people away from God, and it makes Jesus angry.
- The passage concludes with Jesus specifying of the source of people's evil intentions.

Follow with me while I read the text.

Mark 7:1-23 (NRSV)

(1)Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, (2)they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (3)(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; (4)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.) (5)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?” (6)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;

(7)in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

(8)You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

(9)Then he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! (10)For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother; and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ (11)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)—(12)then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, (13)thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.”

(14)Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: (15)there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

(17)When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. (18)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, (19)since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.)

(20)And he said, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. (21)For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, (22)adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. (23)All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

I. The Issue. Jesus was angry, and his anger was at religious leaders whose ministry obscured the real issue by focusing on external observances. And those external observances distracted people from the real question, which is: **what keeps me from God’s presence? Or conversely, on what basis does God accept me?** The operative word in the passage is “defiled,” and it means ceremonially unclean.

God had given the Jews ritual purity laws, and they covered lots of things—what you can and can’t eat, and what you can and cannot touch. If you violated them, you were unclean, and were excluded from worship and basic personal interactions until you were cleansed. The laws are sprinkled through Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. Those laws had various purposes, among them to point beyond themselves to the need for the cleansing of the heart. In other words, they were intended to teach a deeper lesson—that a cleansing on the inside was needed—a cleansing of “the human heart.” But that intended meaning had been missed.

We have some ways expressing ourselves which miss meanings now. For example, Jennie’s mother used to get after her sons for not going to church. But the issue wasn’t really whether they went to church. Her real desire was that her sons would pursue a personal relationship with Christ. If they had done that, they would have gone to church as an expression of that relationship. She later realized that what she was saying wasn’t expressing what she really wanted, and she changed her appeal. The boys still have not pursued that relationship with Christ, but at least the issue was clear.

Briefly, the background to our scripture lesson is this. The keeping of the law, in this case the ceremonial law, was thought to be what made a person acceptable to God. And just to make sure that nobody transgressed the law, the Jewish leadership over time had built what we might call a “buffer” around the law. They expanded the law, so that even if you were a little sloppy in keeping some parts of it, the buffer (that which they called “the tradition of the elders”) would be sure you would not break an essential of the law.

In principle, that might sound good, but in fact, it distracted people from what was really important. By focusing on the externals, the tradition of the elders kept the people from really understanding and pursuing what God was really interested in: purity of heart.

Jesus explains another evasion, the nullifying of the 5th Commandment—honoring one’s parents—by the custom of declaring one’s possessions dedicated to God. The word they used is “Corban.” If something is dedicated to God, it’s unavailable to be given to one’s parents, so the commandment is voided. This little scam works by using one scripture to nullify another.

Why is Jesus angry? What we have is the leadership of God's people emphasizing something that's actually leading them away from pursuing God's way and doing God's will.

I must say that as a clergy person, this passage gives me pause. Please pray for me and Pastor Bill, and the lay leaders of the church. We want to be people whose leadership is in the right direction, and we want to be a church whose practices lead people towards God, not away from him.

II. The Real Story. The real story, of course, was that those washings were to show that a deeper cleansing—a cleansing of the heart—was needed.

The real story is that sin is inside us, and what is needed is a bath on the inside. The fact is that we are not able to give ourselves a bath on the inside. Only God can do that.

There are a number of images of humanity in scripture. They all say the same thing in different ways: we are made in the image of God, and capable of greatness; but we are also possessed of a sinful nature which results in our doing evil and separates us from God and one another. We tend to think we're pretty good folks, and I think Jesus doesn't want us to gloss over what we're capable of, so he spells out some possibilities (vs.21-22): sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, pride, folly.

III. The Good News. The amazing news of the gospel is that God who is offended by our sin *not only will* cleanse us, God **wants** to cleanse us and **delights** when we are willing to come to him, acknowledge our sin, and receive forgiveness and cleansing.

(I am afraid that we hear the gospel message of God's love and willingness to help enough that our familiarity with it robs it of its utterly radical significance. The notion that God who is our judge is also the one who would suffer greatly to pay for our guilt. That God's character is like this is amazingly good news.)

Jesus came as the agent of that salvation, and the bearer of that good news. He said, "This is my body, which is given for you." "This cup is the new testament in my blood which is poured out for you." What he did we could not do for ourselves. That is why, when we gather for worship, one of the things we always do is to confess our sins and receive an assurance of pardon. But this, like the hearing of the gospel, can lose its significance because it's routine.

One grave shortcoming of the teaching Jesus challenges in our text, the tradition of the elders, is that it implies that by our own religious observance, we can cleanse ourselves. By our own diligence, we can make sure that God accepts us. Only God can do that.

Ceremony is important. In baptism, we ceremonially wash a person who comes in faith, or a child who is brought on the faith of their parents. But what we do is a reflection of what we believe God is doing. It has been given to us by God; it is not a tradition we have developed.

IV. Struggle Against Sin. We cannot cleanse ourselves, but we can struggle against sin. The account closes with Jesus and the disciples in a house talking about what Jesus had just said. The discussion of the evil of the human heart could sound like a rant about human depravity unless we remind ourselves about the circumstances.

- Why did Jesus say what he did about the evil in the human heart? Simply, he was asked by people who really wanted to know.
- Who asked? Jesus' disciples, who are also human beings who have hearts from which evil comes. But they want to please God and they need to know the score.
- The speaker is Jesus, who came to give his life to pay the penalty for their sins and ours, and who sent the spirit to us to strengthen them and us to be his followers. Jesus isn't beating up on these people. He's explaining what they're up against, and he's come to give them help which is equal to the task.

We began by seeing Jesus' anger at the people of Israel being misled. In the disciples, we see a group of people who are grappling with the truth. It's not a very flattering truth, but when people know what they're up against, they at least have a chance.

Furthermore, they're a group. They can resist sin together. They can encourage one another, and hold one another accountable.

We are a group, and we can encourage one another, and hold one another accountable. But we're a little large to do that in a personal way.

Look at the image created by the last scene in our text. There are twelve people, and they're in a house. A dozen people in a house meeting with Jesus. That's a small group. I'm sure that my most consistent and exciting growth experiences as a disciple of Jesus have been in small groups of people focused on Jesus in some way—Bible Study, Prayer Group, Mission Team. Small groups of like-minded people help us focus on resisting sin and pleasing God if we are at all open to that focus. They create an atmosphere in which we can take risks and reveal what's really going on inside.

Contrast what was going on at the beginning of our text—Jesus arguing with scribes over washing hands, surrounded by a crowd of people who were listening to the conflict, but who were uncommitted—with this, an earnest group of people in a house discussing with Jesus what's in the heart and what to do about it.

I believe that this contrast is this passage's challenge to us. Each of us need to be in the house with a small group of people interacting with Jesus over how he wants you to live your life. If you aren't currently a member of a group like that, the challenge is to become a member. If you are a member, put some effort into helping the group not to lose focus on this purpose.

Now for a P. S.: I didn't pick this passage to launch our discipleship opportunities, but the image of a dozen people in a house with Jesus is irresistible. In the next month, our adult groups will meeting here on Sunday morning; the men's and women's groups

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M. Sidney McCollum

during the week will be in high gear; the empty nesters will be rolling; and there may well be more if there's a hint of interest.

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