

Mark 7: 1-23

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, ²they 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; ⁴and 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.) ⁵So 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?' ⁶He said to them, 'Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,
"This people honours me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
⁷in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines."
⁸You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.'

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

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

¹⁷When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸He said to them, 'Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, ¹⁹since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?' (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰And he said, 'It is what comes out of a person that defiles. ²¹For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²²adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.'

Commentary: In this passage we are given a good example of the substance of the conflict between Jesus along with the movement he initiated, and the ruling form of Judaism that opposed them. We are not here interested in whether this description of Pharisaic religion is more a caricature than a fair assessment. Rather we are interested with the substance of the teaching and its accompanying implications. What is the nature of true purity? This is the question. Is it a matter of external rites and customs or is it more foundationally a matter of the heart? Clearly, Jesus underlines the importance of a purity rooted in the heart, rooted in one's inner thoughts, passions and intentions. True evil and true good are things that arise from within, not things that depend on what one professes and does on the outside.

This passage is also especially relevant to what we're all undergoing in this season of Covid-19. We all recognize the importance of external rules for purification – washing hands and sanitizing all surfaces, etc. But given how we are all in this together, the feelings of resentment and judgement can arise all too easily within us toward each other, especially when we feel some are not complying with the external rules as rigorously as they should. When do external necessities poison our hearts so that we lose what is even more vital about our individual humanity and collective relationships? Without genuine love, without love as grace, generosity and understanding toward one another, without ways of challenging each other graciously rather than judgmentally and contemptuously, what real hope is there for positive change to happen among us and within us?

Prayer: Come into my heart, O God, ever more deeply, fully and formatively. May the stress, fear and resentment over outward compliance to purity standards not overwhelm the motivation and inspiration toward inner purity of heart, driven by your love; Amen.