

Heart Trouble

James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

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Jesus and his disciples are sharing a meal. Nearby there were some serious Religious Authorities (Scribes and Pharisees) who were quick to notice that Jesus' followers were not following tradition. They were not washing their hands before eating their meal. For us, of course, washing before meals is common hygiene but for the Pharisees and Scribes it was about their religious faith. Tradition. It was about practicing purity laws that were concrete ways of being; an embodying practice that showed they were called by God to be holy like God was holy. They were called to be set apart in order to be God's servant people in the wider world.

In other words, their traditions gave them identity. They knew who they were and Whose they were every time they washed their hands before a meal, every time they ate kosher food, every time they prayed in a certain posture, every time they observed Sabbath, and so on. The Jews were a small minority in the massive melting pot of the Roman Empire, without these traditions and rituals, the Jewish people would lose their distinctive identity, become assimilated, and worse, God's people and God's plan to bring redemption to the whole world would be lost. Washing hands was not just about washing hands.

At their best, rituals, habits, practices, and traditions keep us connected to the deep mysteries of life. The outer life of ritual and practice and the inner life of God and mystery are all of one piece. The inward journey and the outward journey are connected.

The danger is when the outer life of practice becomes disconnected from the inner life of mystery. One without the other becomes distorted. The inner life can become narcissistic and Gnostic, so spiritual that it has nothing to do with where we live and how we live with others. On the other hand, the outward life can become brittle, empty, thin, and legalistic. The truth is, when the outer life loses its deeper context in the Living God, who gives it meaning, it can become a way to protect ourselves against God. Ritual and tradition can become ways to keep God and mystery at a distance.

Tradition is an ongoing conversation across time about things that matter. But what had happened with these Pharisees and Scribes is that they no longer were having a conversation about why they were to wash their hands. They were practicing hand washing without remembering why. Their tradition had become a kind of traditionalism in which their habits, rituals, and practices had lost their roots. These practices had become untethered to why they were to observe and do these traditions of the elders. The rituals were abstracted and had lost their context.

From the perspective of the Pharisees and the Scribes the followers of Jesus were threatening to upend not only centuries of teaching but were opening their lives and this world to outside spiritual forces. Dirty hands lead to dirty lives and dirty lives allow sin and evil to run amok. Better to wash one's hands, keep oneself pure, and not have anything to do with the impure.

You have heard this story a couple of times, so I'll keep it short, but it clearly speaks to what we're talking about. A few years ago, I was leaving a meeting with several clergy members. I overheard one tall-steeple pastor telling

another pastor, a very small church pastor, that he would not participate in the Ministerial Alliance because “children of light have nothing to do with children of darkness.”

I already knew some of the pastors refused to attend the Ministerial Alliance because the rest of us included clergy who were of other faiths and traditions. They considered themselves “children of light” and they would have nothing to do with us, the so-called “children of darkness.”

From the perspective of the tall steeple Pharisees and Scribes, Jesus and his disciples were blurring the distinction between the pure and the impure. There was fear that the Children of Light were consorting with Children of Darkness. It is the fear of being contaminated by evil spiritual forces, secularity, strangers, people who are different and other threats outside of us.

Jesus calls the crowd of onlookers to gather around and says, “Listen up! Nothing on the outside of you can defile you. The danger is what comes from inside of you... It is from within, from the heart, that evil and sinful intentions come...” (Mk 7:14-15).

Jesus knew that even the best intentions can become corrupted. They can become substitutes for devotion to God while our hearts are occupied with protecting the self, and we become fearful of others who are different, or become filled with suspicion and mistrust. Jesus says, quoting Isaiah, we can “honor God with our lips,” while our “hearts are far from God” (Mk. 7:6).

We need to have pure hearts if we hope to have pure and wholesome words. The pure in heart are those who are spiritually pure rather than ritually or ceremonially clean. Jesus, centuries before the advent of annual health checkups, is recommending that we all get our hearts checked!

As Jesus points out in Mark 7:20-23, harmful words express evil intentions that lead to harmful deeds. They come from the heart. For Jesus' listeners the heart was not a faculty separate from the mind, but the seat of emotions, intellect, will, and spiritual life. Our words come from our hearts and often, head straight for the heart of another. Words come from the heart and head for the heart. If the heart is a poisoned well, it has great potential to defile. Words are powerful.

When my brother and I were growing up we got in the usual fights and hurled the usual verbal garbage at each other. My grandmother would shake her head and say, "I wish you two could hear yourselves." All of us can all recall hurtful words with which we have poisoned the air around us. Looking back, most of us wish the childhood saying had been true: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." The truth is that words do hurt and wound. Words are powerful; they can be constructive – build us and our world up – or they can be destructive – tear us and our world down. To use biblical imagery, they can bless, or they can curse.

There is a connection between toxic hearts and toxic words. Part of the calling of being disciples of Jesus is to detox our hearts and detox our words. And by consistent prayer and encouragement and accountability from one another God can cleanse us of toxicity. Note I said both encouragement and accountability – from each other, from those of us who trust one another the most.

The Apostle Paul says, “It is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (II Cor. 4:6).

Paul is saying that our calling is to be witnesses of Christ, who point to Christ in all we do and in all we say. People hear our words and decide whether God is real, whether Christ is love or if Christ and Christ-followers are full of hate, anger, and rage.

Austin Heights, we are clear that our calling is not to hunker down behind our walls and gated communities and churches and not consort with so-called children of darkness. We know Jesus calls us to go forth and be bold witnesses of the Good News that God in Christ is love and mercy and forgiveness.

Another quick story you’ve heard before. Kay Chism is one of the best public elementary school teachers I’ve ever known. For several years she had conscientious evangelical Christian parents withdraw their children from school and from her classroom because the parents did not want their children exposed to the bad behavior and poor academic habits of the other children. And there were spiritual concerns, too. The parents did not want their children exposed to what they believed were non-Christian, un-Christian, un-biblical, and ungodly ways of thinking. It did not matter to them very much that Kay is a serious Christian herself. So the parents would withdraw their kids from public school to home school them or put them in private church related schools.

So Kay began to challenge these Christian parents to keep their children in the classroom as an act of mission and ministry. She told them that they can trust

God and that good kids with good habits can influence an entire classroom just as much and even better than kids with bad habits. She would ask, “Don’t you believe that God works in and through your children for good? That your children can be a witness to the Way of Jesus?” And so some, not many, of the parents kept their children in Kay’s classes and the kids did well and the class did well.

Christ calls us like Kay called those parents: root our lives in Christ and then “boldly go” out there to serve and make a difference. At the same time, I want us to pay attention to what Jesus is saying to us this morning during these days when division and discord is rampant, where there is much rage and fear, and people, including ourselves, say some harsh things.

As we’ve said, the inward journey and the outward journey are connected. Good, healthy outward practices of faith connect us to the deeper mystery of God. Practices of faith that deepen our roots in Christ will also propel us outward to others around us. We learn to look for God in the other person and in relationship. These same practices of the inward journey and the outward journey teach us to slow down enough to pay attention so we might discover God within us, too. The inward journey of prayer, contemplation, worship, Bible reading is connected to the outward journey of serving others and the outward journey of ritual and tradition. Without serving others, our inward life will become stagnant and die. Without the inward, our outward life will become exhausted, and full of resentment. Without the rooted inner life of the heart, the outward life feels like a screech across a black board.

A primary reason I went to seminary in Louisville, Kentucky was that I wanted to be in a school where I could learn about or at least, be close to people

who knew about farmer and writer Wendell Berry, and the Catholic monk Thomas Merton, who had been in Gethsemane Monastery about an hour or so south of Louisville.

Merton devoted his life to going deeper into the inward journey. The interior life of prayer was his calling. When he was young, he wanted to seclude himself more and more from the concerns of the world behind the walls of the monastery and immerse himself in prayer. But the irony is that the deeper he went the wider his vision became, and the concerns of his heart grew larger. More and more the abbot assigned Merton to tasks that would take him outside the walls of the monastery. One day he was in downtown Louisville. Merton later wrote:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness.

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed...

And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.”
(from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, pp. 157-158).

Realizing that everyone is walking around shining like the sun is very different from labeling people as “children of darkness.” But it comes from rooting our lives in the inward journey. How we see others, how we behave, and what we say and do are directly related to what is going on in our hearts.

“There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile” (Mk. 7:15).

When I get my heart checkup, my doctor tells me to watch what goes into my mouth. Jesus says we need to check our hearts and watch what comes out of them!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.