

Listen to Jesus!

Mark 7.1-23

St Mark's Lutheran Church

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A friend once told me "Scripture is not a tool for shaming or guilt. Scripture is a word of life, love, power, and hope. So, if you come away from scripture feeling shame or guilt than you have read it incorrectly. You have forgotten to read it through the lens of the cross." Today's text, especially the last few verses, is one which can easily leave us feeling rotten and irredeemable in our rottenness, that is, if we fail to read it through the lens of the cross. And by the lens of the cross, I mean God's ongoing, extravagant, undeserving, inexplicable, unbreakable, powerful love.

Failing to read, or interpret, or teach, or apply scripture through this love, is dangerous. For when we leave out God's love, God's word becomes a burden to bear, a tool for shaming and guilt, and easily manipulatable. And this is exactly what Jesus was addressing in today's reading. Traditions, based upon teachings which had lost their love-oriented compass, had become burdensome, distracting doctrine.

The tradition in question today is the purification ritual of hand-washing. It was understood that people would wash their hands before eating. Keep in mind this has nothing to do with hygiene. Germs were not even a concept at this time. The purification rituals, were among other things, ways for the Jews to distinguish themselves as God's people; to separate them from all the other people among whom they lived. For thousands of years this ritual had been exclusive to priests but as the Jews became more integrated into a multi-cultural, polytheistic community, some of the priestly rituals, including this one, turned into daily rituals for the common folks. And that which was once intended to unify and purify (which means elevate and distinguish), turned into an untenable responsibility with the loveless consequence of exclusion.

So, in today's text, Jesus is accosted by a group of religious leaders, who ask him to explain why he is allowing his disciples to eat without having first washed their hands. And Jesus uses this opportunity to reeducate not only the religious leaders but the crowd and the disciples. And he does so with full authority. In three different conversations, using slightly different language, Jesus says, "It's not what you eat or how you wash your body that distinguishes you as God's chosen people. It is what you say and how you act that sets you apart." Jesus declares the purity ritual of handwashing unnecessary, unhelpful, and even harmful because it distracts from what is most important. He does not engage any of them in a debate. The topic is not open to conversation. He simply tells them, "Listen to **me**," because he has, he is, the final, definitive, authoritative word.

I want to jump to the list of "evil intentions" which close out today's Gospel reading. This is, at least for me, the most challenging part of this reading and therefore feels like the most important. It is the part of this text that can leave us feeling rotten and irredeemable in our rottenness, leave us feeling evil, if we fail to receive it through the lens, the love, of the cross.

This final section begins with Jesus, the authoritative word, uttering a strong statement. He says, "For it is from within, from the human heart, that **evil intentions** come."

And then he continues by naming many evil intentions, ranging from murder, theft, and adultery to envy, arrogance, and impatience. It is a litany that is expansive in its inclusion of humanity. We all find our place on this list, claiming different, and often multiple verbs, at different times in our lives.

And then Jesus closes with these harrowing words: "All these **evil** things come from within, and **they defile a person.**"

What are we to do with this text, other than avoid it, ignore it? Or maybe cut it out of our bibles like a expired coupon from an outdated magazine. That would be nice, wouldn't it? But it's in the bible and it

is attributed to Jesus, so we must take it seriously. And, as my friend said, "Scripture only makes us feel worthless, hopeless, when we fail to read it through lens of the cross, the lens of love."

So, with that in mind, let's look at this difficult to hear text. And let's start with the words "evil" and "defiled."

Defiled is used numerous times throughout this whole reading. And the Greek word "koi-nice," has a definition that is bigger than our English definition. "Koi-nice/ defiled" means, among other things, "common" as in "not set apart, not distinguished from others" but instead just like everyone else.

There are three different words in the Greek language that are used for evil. This text includes two of those words: kak-oce and ponareous. "Kak-oce" which is used in Jesus's opening statement "it is from the human heart that evil 'kakoce' intentions come", means "ill and malicious." And "ponareous" which is the form of evil used in the final statement "all these evil 'ponareous' things come from within", means "worthless."

So, with those definitions in mind, let me offer you a slightly different translation of the two sentences which bookend the litany of intentions.

First, "For it is from within, from the human heart, that malicious intentions come."

And, "All these worthless things come from within, and they render a person common, just like everyone else."

In case you did not catch this – No where does Jesus refer to people as evil or worthless. He uses these terms to describe human actions. Now, if we can agree that most of us find ourselves on this list, not because we always have malicious intentions (though sometimes we absolutely do), but instead because we are human. And if we can find comfort in the fact that Jesus is not condemning people but their actions. Then maybe, we can approach this teaching with humility rather than shame, and with hopeful curiosity rather than fear. Together, we can approach this teaching through the lens of the cross.

One of the primary points of the purity rituals, the carefully prescribed rules about when and where and what and how and with whom people can eat, was to set the Jews apart from everyone else, to distinguish them as God's special people. Jesus is telling the disciples, that purity rituals will not compensate for a sick heart. Scrubbing your hands will not compensate for murder. Not eating pork will not compensate for theft. Not drinking blood will not compensate for adultery. Not mixing dairy and blood will not compensate for slander. Not eating with Gentiles will not compensate for envy. Murder, theft, adultery, slander, envy, dishonesty, and greed, among other things, are common. And every time we give into to these impulses or act in these ways, we defile ourselves, we affirm our commonness. Washing our hands before we eat will not elevate us, if with those same hands we act out harmful impulses, malicious intents. The way we distinguish ourselves as different, is by following the commandment that encompasses all the commandments - "Love God and Love Neighbor." Anything else, anything that undermines God and our neighbor is "poneorous," it is worthless, because it does not contribute to the upbuilding of God's Kingdom.

PAUSE

Now, if we read this text void of the cross, then we are stuck in a dismal place, because on our own, by our own works, we will never successfully heal our hearts and elevate ourselves, make ourselves special children of God. But, we are not called nor are we expected to do this work alone. And in the cross, we are freed from the faithless competition of trying to elevate ourselves, to qualify to be counted among God's children. In order to be elevated, we must position ourselves above others. We must participate in a hierarchy. This runs counter to the ministry of Christ and the message of the cross. There is no hierarchy in God's kingdom. Sin is sin. This is evident in the list of intentions that Jesus cited. Murder is named alongside folly, theft is neighbor to pride. Just there is no hierarchy for sin in God's kingdom, there is also no hierarchy for grace. Grace is grace. And we each receive an equally infinite portion in Jesus's death and resurrection.

Jesus died as a result of humanity's malicious intentions and out of an unwavering love for each of us with our ill hearts. Through his death Jesus declared all humanity worthy of elevation, worthy of an unwavering love. And through his resurrection we are assured of our worthiness. As Jesus said, it is a complete waste of our time to try and elevate ourselves through external measures (what we eat, what we wear, how we look, what we have, with whom we spend our time, etc). All of this is a distraction from what really matters – the health of our heart and the hearts of our neighbors. With our sin, our malicious intentions, no longer held against us, we are free to face ourselves, to do a moral inventory, and confidently seek God's help in healing our ill hearts. When we do so, we put our faith in Christ and we claim, we believe in, the gift of elevation that Christ has given us. We bear witness to God's miraculous power. And we, you, are living demonstration of what it means to be a redeemed, purified person in a tragically common world.