

The message given by Rev. Dr. Tom Zoelzer on Sunday, August 30, 2009 based on Mark 7:1-23

It's what's on the Inside!

Jesus was going about his work in Galilee in the gospel of Mark when it happened. He was confronted by Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem who criticized him because some of his disciples ate with defiled hands. In other words, they did not wash their hands before they ate.

This led to a big discussion between Jesus and the men from Jerusalem about what was clean and unclean in the sight of God and what defiled a person with God. In Jesus' day, the Pharisees were the dominant religious group within Judaism at the time.

Today, we think it strange that there is so much diversity in religion. But it is not unusual at all. Down through time, different wings of understanding have emerged about God. Even within each religion, there are different branches. In Christianity, for example, there is an orthodox view of Christianity. There is a fundamentalist/evangelical view of faith, and a more progressive open view.

Judaism also had and has its wings of understanding of the Jewish faith and at the time of Jesus, the Pharisaic tradition had become the dominant understanding in Jerusalem and the Pharisees had most of the official positions in the Temple. The Pharisees had developed traditions called the "tradition of the Elders" of how to practice the laws of Moses, and they put a great deal of time into promoting those customs. There was much about ritually washing food, pots and pans, dishes, hands, etc.

Jesus criticizes those customs as burdensome and unnecessary fences that the Pharisees had built around the laws of Moses, and this disagreement became the point of tension between Jesus and the Pharisees all the way to the cross. He especially criticized the Pharisees for emphasizing ritualistic things over more serious things like practicing justice and mercy.

In Mark 7, the issue was about Jesus' disciples eating with defiled hands and other cleansing rituals. Jesus responded:

⁶Isaiah 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.'

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, 'Honor 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:

Do you know what I really hate about this passage?.. It makes my inner life subject to God. I would love a religion that gives me some rituals to perform and rules to perform, and everything else is my private

business. But no – Jesus came to teach us that God is Lord of our insides as well as our outside acts. We are accountable to God inside and out.

Now that may not be particularly good news for most of us because we have lots of stuff going on the inside. We can put on a good show to the outside world, but many times our inner thoughts or what goes on in our homes tells a different story. Jesus came to teach us that God is Lord of our insides as well as our outsides.

Well, it's that just wonderful!? What I have learned about faith in God as revealed in scriptures is this – God cares about us and wants to be in relationship and connection with us, and God gives us free will to make decisions about our life. But God gives us some boundaries and directives so that we stay in bounds with God and each other.

It's like my favorite line from the old TV series called "Night Court" starring Harry Anderson. In one episode, there was an emergency because of a snow storm in New York City and street people were invited into the courtroom to stay warm. The heat started to go off in the building so the judge gave some instructions and asked, "Are there any questions?" To which one of the winos in the room asked, "Yes, why is the sky blue?" Dumbfounded, the judge responded, "Because if it were green, we won't know where to stop mowing!"

What the Hebrew Scriptures teach us is where to stop mowing. So if we are mad enough to want to kill someone, we get the message "Stop" that's out of bounds with God. If we are tempted to steal something to get ahead or have something that is not ours, we get the message "Stop" that is out of bounds. If we are contemplating lying to get ahead or to say

something falsely about someone, we get the message “Stop” this is out of bounds with God and each other. And if we contemplate sexual relationships with someone other than the person we are in a committed relationship with, we get the message, “Stop” that is out of bounds with God and our partner.

Then Jesus came along and teaches us that our inner self needs to be as authentic as our outer behavior and to live the virtues and attitudes of compassion, humility, kindness, justice, mercy, and most of all love. Jesus teaches us that what’s on the inside that counts.

Our scripture from James puts it this way: ¹⁹You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. ²¹Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

It is what is on the inside that defiles. It is what is on the inside that brings us into connection and communion with God and others. So what should we do?.. I think it takes a great deal of prayer and reflection on our part. It is about turning to God and saying, “God I can’t do this by myself. I know there are thoughts and attitudes that come out of me that are wrong or hurtful. Help me change my heart and my mind. Help me live in the image of your creative spark in me. Help me bring out those things that reflect Your grace and mercy. Help me live in the image of Jesus Christ. Forgive me and help me find a better path.

Is that possible? I would like to think so. I think you can do it! Are you ready to take a vow to do it?

I ask that question because today we have people taking vows. A family has come forward to have their second child baptized, and not only

are they seeking God's blessing on their child, they are also making vows to raise their children in a Christian home and bring the principles of compassion, love, and forgiveness into their family reality. This is what is happening when people take vows of baptism for their children.

In a few minutes, we are going to ordain new Elders into the life of the congregation. They will take vows of faith and service.

Each of us, when we are confirmed or baptized or join a congregation we take vows of belief and service in the ways of Jesus Christ. We declare that we want to be a Christian and live within the boundaries and virtues of our faith. Do we fail sometimes? You bet. Are we hypocritical in what we say we believe and what we do? You bet. Are we all Christians in training, learning how to trust God more and follow in the ways of Jesus? You bet!

The Book of James today invites us to be doers of the word not just hearer. It starts on the inside. How are your insides? Amen.