

“From the Heart” A sermon by Lee Ireland
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church
September 2, 2018, Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

Let us pray together: Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.

Is there a ‘good guy’ or a ‘bad guy’ in this story about washing hands? I grew up watching westerns where the bad guys wore black and the good guys wore white. But I was watching a black and white TV. It was only later, when we got a color TV that I found out the Lone Ranger was always in blue. At least he rode a white horse. Boy, am I dating myself! The Lone Ranger was the good guy and those he fought were always dressed in dark clothes.

This good and bad color designation continues in many of today’s movies. Think about Princess Leah from the Star Wars series of films. What color did she wear? White. What color was Darth Vader wearing? Black. The story continues.

So, is there a good guy, so to speak, in this scripture? Is there a bad guy in this scripture? On the surface it’s easy to say that Jesus was the good guy (and he is), and the Pharisees and the scribes were the bad guys. Is it really that simple? I’m afraid that this bad-good scenario has been used to malign the Jews. It was an easy thing to do considering how Mark wrote this story. But, by defaming the Jews – whoever does so – that person is actually doing what Jesus is preaching against. **“From the human heart comes deceit, envy, slander, pride.**

Let’s take a closer look at this story.

Did Jesus follow the laws and traditions of the Jewish people? I’d say ‘yes.’ He was raised in a Jewish family. The Bible says it was his custom was to attend synagogue on the Sabbath (Luke 4:16). Jesus once declared, **“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”** (Matthew 15:24). Further, Jesus also said, **“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill (the law).”** (Matthew 5:17). Would Jesus actually tell his fellow Jews that following Jewish practices was not proper behavior?

To use a phrase one of my friends often says: “I don’t think so!”

So, why this confrontation between the Pharisees and the scribes and Jesus? We really don’t know that the disciples didn’t wash their hands before meals. The Bible doesn’t tell us that. The comment from the Pharisees and scribes could have been a mistake. They didn’t see the disciples washing their hands, so they just assumed they didn’t. We know that Jesus didn’t defend the disciples.

I believe that Mark, the author of today’s story about Jesus, is using this situation to set up Jesus’ teaching. We don’t know that for sure. But what we do know is that Jesus took advantage of the moment to make a point about the distinction between practices that symbolized a pure and holy life and actually living a holy and pure life. I believe that Jesus used this situation as a teaching moment, not just to the religious elite, but to the crowd as well. The Bible says in verse 14: **Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand . . .**

What was the lesson that Jesus was trying to teach in these verses from Mark? As I said, Jesus was pointing out that there is a difference between fooling people into thinking you are living a pure and holy life and actually living a pure and holy life. Beginning in verse 6, Jesus says: **“Isaiah prophesied**

rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.'

Today, we call a person whose religious practices does not match his or her actual practices a hypocrite.

One of the strangest cases of hypocrisy by an apparently religious person involved one Cecil T. Turner of Louisville, Kentucky. He was arrested in 2003 for burglary and fraudulent use of a credit card. The sticky-fingered Mr. Turner had obtained the card and several other items by ransacking several women's purses while they were attending a church meeting.

The curious aspect of this story is the business where Mr. Turner chose to use the credit card he stole. The police traced it to a Christian bookstore in a nearby town, where he had used it to purchase ten copies of a Bible study called "Making Peace With Your Past," as well as a follow-up study called "Moving Beyond Your Past." Searching their suspect's home, police found receipts for those purchases which clinched the indictment.

What is the difference between practices that symbolize a pure and holy life and actually living a pure and holy life? The difference? What's in your heart. That's what's important to God.

In Jesus' day, the heart was not primarily thought of as the organ that pumps blood through your body. In the Bible, the heart is the place where emotions and desires begin. It was primarily viewed as a spiritual organ where our behavior originates. The heart was the center of one's whole being or self. A hardhearted person is one who is self-centered, resistant to God and what God wants that person to do. This Biblical idea of the heart is what Jesus is talking about when he says in verse 21: **For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come. . .**

Jesus' teaching moment arose because he observed people's preoccupation with the external. People were concerned with looking holy and pure. Jesus saw that something was wrong with this picture. He wanted the crowd, his disciples and us to understand that God wants our love for God to motivate our behavior. God doesn't want the behaviors Jesus mentions at the end of this story – a list of very negative behaviors.

God wants our hearts and our very lives. We know from scripture that God looks at our hearts. 1 Samuel 16:7, when God is selecting the next king of the Hebrew people, God say to Samuel, **"Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."**

Yes, God wants your heart. God wants your love for God to motivate the behaviors that originate in your heart. If that's not your motivation, then you and I are simply going through the motions. It's a little bit like a young person who is learning to play the piano. She can learn the notes of a piece, the way to hold her hands. She can memorize the piano piece note for note and never miss a note when she is playing the piece, but if her heart is not in the piece, something is missing. She is playing the notes, but is it music? Will it inspire or start voices singing or feet tapping?

Good guys/bad guys? Not in this scripture. The difference between those who have a heart for God and those who don't is what Jesus is teaching. This week consider where your heart is – what motivates you. What comes out of your heart? Forget about others and examine yourself. When it comes to your faith and your actions, are they from your heart motivated by your love for God?