

What Lies Within
Mark 7.1-8, 14-15, 21-23
September 2, 2018
Pentecost +15B
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After a summer in Hebrews, we step back into lectionary readings and a season with Mark. As much as we might want a passage about rest and peace on this long weekend, we are instead launched into a debate on what is clean, what is unclean, and a pretty angry Jesus calling religious folks hypocrites. If any of this raises your hackles or brings you pause about coming to church today, remember the great invitation by Shane Claiborne. When someone tells him they don't attend church because the church is full of hypocrites, he responds, "Oh, no! It's not nearly full. We have plenty of room for more!"

Jesus starts in a conversation with religious leaders who seem to be really good at minding everybody else's business. They must be Southerners because they come to him with the classic, unrequested observation, "I couldn't help but notice," with a side of, "You know, it doesn't matter to *ME* at all, but *SOME* people are sayin'..." In this case, they couldn't help but notice that Jesus wasn't teaching his disciples to follow (or deeply value and honor) the traditions around physical purity. "I couldn't help but notice that some of your disciples aren't washing themselves properly before a meal. I'm sure you must have overlooked that, Jesus. Because surely you're teaching them proper etiquette, Jesus. Of course you would want them to know how we do things around here, Jesus."

At its most innocent, when I think of this tendency of code-minding, I recall the elderly woman who came up to me after my first Sunday in a previous church, patted me on the arm and said, "I'm telling you this as a friend, dear," as she proceeded to give me unsolicited fashion advice on Sunday morning lady-like-ness. But we know good and well, and this is why Jesus became so angry, that at its most toxic, this tendency of code-minding is dangerous and destructive. Toxic code-minding is what we are talking about when religious leaders abuse the microphones in front of their faces week after week thereby creating such an aggressive culture of clean and unclean that a 4th grade boy in Denver could be bullied to death for his

sexual and gender identities. Jesus doesn't care about the tradition of code-minding that cuts people out, breaks people down, abuses and neglects the most vulnerable in our society. He has no patience or tolerance for the toxic, dangerous, destructive ways of insular religious communities.

To be clear, Jesus is not identifying one religious tradition as the source of such toxic hypocrisy. No, he speaks to the leaders in power because he knows their impact is broad and deep even among those who will not darken their doors. He speaks to the human tendency to hold to tradition for tradition's sake while losing the essence of the thing altogether. And while too many preachers are yelling at the culture for being unclean, Jesus gathers those preachers together and calls them a bunch of hypocrites.

Frederick Buechner says of Jesus' relationship to the Pharisees, "What seems to have made him angriest was hypocrisy and irrelevance, and thus it is the Pharisees who come in for his strongest attacks, the good people who should have known better. 'You brood of vipers,' he called them. 'How can you speak good when you are evil?'"¹ "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."²

Jesus leaves the religious leaders and then calls to the crowd. He calls the ones not in leadership, the ones not in authority, the ones being preached against, the ones considered unclean, the ones outside the temple walls, the ones someone "couldn't help but notice" didn't belong in dignified places a long time ago. Jesus calls these people to him and speaks clearly: Listen now, all of you—take this to heart: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.

The language of clean and unclean still likely sounds problematic to us, and it lends itself to the either/or dualism that we mindfully avoid here as overly simplistic and rather unhelpful. Think about this portion of the text as a blessing instead. How might Jesus' words to the crowd be a blessing to them? He draws this group of

¹ Frederick Buechner, *The Faces of Jesus*

² Mark 7.8

people to himself. Leaving the walls of the religious center of the community, he looks them in the eyes and points back over his shoulder saying, "They're wrong. The messages you've heard about yourself from those guys in there is wrong. There is nothing unclean about who you are. There is nothing defiled about you because of what you eat or what you wear or who you share a meal with. What matters to me, what matters to God, what matters in this world is what's going on within you. That's where the good and evil gets stirred up. That's where the blessing and cursing happens. That's where you decide if you're leaning into the goodness and beauty within you or leaning into the shadows and fear. That's where you must decide if you're going to believe the stuff they've said about you or the truth God has whispered into your very being. The secret it: you could check off every box that these guys want you to check off and still be absolutely dripping with evil if that's what's coming out of your heart.

This is a message of great challenge and great inclusion. The Jesus path is both broader and more narrow at once. The way of Jesus is lighter and heavier because the onus is on us to do our work, examine our hearts, clean ourselves from the inside out so that we are making room for and tending the very image of God within us.

Karoline Lewis adds, "What you say and what you do are not separate from who you are. Period. Your words and your actions are indeed windows through which to view your soul. And those who think they can convince others of their ideas as separate from their true self are delusional.

This is a 'come to Jesus' text, if you will. That is, if you expect to follow Jesus, then this will demand an excruciating examination of yourself, your true intentions, your true beliefs, and on what you stake your relationship with God. 'For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like' (James 1:23-24)."

After these public words, Jesus goes home. He heads into the house with the disciples who do not understand what they have just seen and heard. They don't understand why he's throwing out rules about clean food and clean bodies. Why is he yelling at the other spiritual leaders and calling them hypocrites? Why is he

blessing people who aren't in good standing with or even part of a religious tradition?

He takes a deep breath and stares at the baffled circle of friends. The ones who never seem to understand. The ones who always wait until the door is closed to say, "Jesus, what in the world is going on?!" He tells them they're getting lost in all that stuff about clean hands and clean food. Nothing about that defiles who you are as a person. "It's what comes out of a person that pollutes: obscenities, lusts, thefts, murders, adulteries, greed, depravity, deceptive dealings, carousing, mean looks, slander, arrogance, foolishness—all these are vomit from the heart. *There is the source of your pollution.*"³ *sigh* Yeah, we know this pollution, don't we?

As Pastor Rachael Keefe observes, "If you wash your hands just because it is part of tradition, then your hands might be dirtier than those who come to the table unwashed. Jesus has no patience for those who follow the traditions with only their lips (or hands) but not their hearts. Jesus clearly states that no food or dirt (or germs) can defile a person. It's what comes out of us, usually our mouths, that's a problem. We can uphold tradition all we want, but if our words and actions are not loving of God, ourselves, our neighbors, or Creation there's a problem. Is there a discrepancy between what we say we believe and what we do in our churches? What can we do to bring more Love into the world?"⁴

You see it's good news and it's hard news. It's good news because chances are: there are parts of our religious and spiritual lives that we hold onto because of habit that simply fuel pretense and pretending. Jesus is blessing us to let that stuff go. Life is too short and too important to pretend. It's hard news because chances are: our addiction to the habits that fuel pretense and pretending have hurt people, kept people out, made people feel unwelcome, poisoned folks against Christianity.

It's good news because chances are: we can release what no longer serves and shed what isn't authentic and true. What a blessing! What a relief! It's hard news because chances are: now we have to get to work cleaning up the messes we have

³ Mark 7.20-23, *The Message*

⁴ <https://revgalblogpals.org/2018/08/28/rcl-trying-to-abide-in-gods-tent/>

made in our attempts to protect tradition and the messes we have made in our lives by hiding our inner most beings from the stuff of our faith. This is the work of repentance—turning from the path we have been traveling, changing direction, and turning onto the path of Christ. And on the path of Christ intentions matter, heart stuff matters, shadow self matters, tending the garden of the soul matters.

Jesus is calling us to tell the truth about our lives. This calling will test us and stretch us as we discover what is really within us. On this journey of the heart, we will face what is true self and original goodness and what is false self and cultural shadow. The good news is that we have the capacity to do this work, do it well, and do it together. The hard news is that we have our work cut out for us. And it begins right now as we prepare ourselves for this meal of renewal, remembrance, and recommitment.

May this ritual be a time of releasing that which no longer serves. Turning from paths that harm and destroy onto paths that restore us to goodness and lovingkindness. May this ritual enable us to tell the truth about our lives AND to believe and receive the truth Christ tells us about ourselves. At this table may you know who you really are and lean into that original blessing. At this table may you and I together be restored for the healing work we are called to do in this world, together, in Jesus' name. Amen.