



**Southwestern Minnesota Synod**  
**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

### **Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23**

<sup>7:1</sup> Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, <sup>7:2</sup> they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. <sup>7:3</sup> (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; <sup>7:4</sup> and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) <sup>7:5</sup> So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" <sup>7:6</sup> He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; <sup>7:7</sup> in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines. <sup>7:8</sup> You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

<sup>7:14</sup> Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: <sup>7:15</sup> there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."

<sup>7:21</sup> For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, <sup>7:22</sup> adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. <sup>7:23</sup> All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

## Sermon by Bishop Jon V. Anderson

**August 29, 2021**

Grace to you and peace sisters and brothers saved by the heart and loving work of Christ Jesus. Amen.

One of my favorite Bible teachers talks about how in the Gospel of Mark the disciples are more "**Duhciples**," bringing to mind Homer Simpson from the Simpsons.

- I don't know about you, but when I think I have got things figured out in my relationship with God and following Jesus, I usually step in a cow pie quite quickly.
- Back when I was young as a seminarian, I was asked to read the Gospel of Mark in one sitting for 13 weeks in row while I studied the Gospel. It changed how I experience and think about the Bible. I realized I was a **duhciple** who quoted Bible verses but did not see how the Gospels and other writings were whole letters and Gospels.

Today's lesson from Mark jumps through several sections. You might want to try sitting down and reading the Gospel in one sitting.

- There are things that don't show up in our worship lessons.
- There are lessons that come after you and challenge you with God's law.
- There are sweet words of comfort that surprise you.
- Sometimes a scripture verse that accused you the last time you read it turns into something that speaks pure promise or Gospel to you because your situation in life has changed.

Today's sermon was taped to be shared with congregations across our synod who are without an interim pastor or who were not able to identify a pastor on our supply list to come.

- This whole experience of moving from surplus of pastoral candidates a few years ago to our current challenges also make me feel like a *duhciple*.
- I want to thank publicly all the pastors and lay leaders who are preaching and providing emergency and sacramental coverage.
- I was thinking I would not preach today, the last Sunday in my time as bishop, but Christ Lutheran in Hendricks where I am today has been with a pastor for a long time. I am excited to be there and share my worship with them.
- I suspect this pattern where we are experiencing distribution issues with pastors will continue due to multiple forces - baby boomer retirements, grandchildren like mine being in metro locations bringing their grandparents closer, difficult conversations and relationship erosion related to COVID breaking apart the relationship between congregations and leaders - This pattern will continue in the near future. What then will we do?
- We are actively training and working to support lay preachers who are stepping forward to lead worship. We are authorizing some lay people and also finding our larger congregations and parishes with pastors willing to be generous and share pastors with our smaller membership or area parishes in ways I would not have imagined. I also want to thank your council and the councils of congregations who are sharing their pastors for the sake of the Gospel. I want to thank our rostered ministers, pastors in particular for their extra effort. Bishop-Elect Pederson will help you in this work in the days to come.
- We have always talked a good deal about the priesthood of all believers, but now I am watching people step forward to lead confirmation, visitation teams bringing communion to homes, lay people focusing on their communities and inviting people who have lost or never connected to a faith community. When a church develops its ministry muscles, I think they become more attractive not just to pastors but to your neighbors. I know you also become able to serve the mission of Jesus better. For all of you have taken a deep breath and stepped forward to serve in ways...or been called to sustain the life and ministry of your congregation, I give thanks to God for you.

So for all of you stepping up, lay leaders and pastors like me....Today's Gospel lesson has a powerful word of law....and Gospel.

- A long time ago we interviewed a pastor who was also a teacher in my former parish in New Ulm. Pr./Dr. Elizabeth Johnson talks about today's lesson in way that I found very powerful. "Jesus comes after the most religious with the sharpest words" – Elizabeth Johnson
- If you have had a title like Bishop for 18 years – you notice this. You hear God's demands in scripture of those who are religious leaders. It is ironic, but fitting, this Gospel show up on the last Sunday I am preaching.

Jesus is critiquing religious leaders for their misdirected piety – spirituality – their faith practices. What we do as religious leaders and religious people is to point to our gracious God....

- But it is easy for the customs, the rituals – not just worship rituals but other things that are part of the life of our congregation and our faith to become the center. Our Gracious God and the work of Jesus ...the love of Jesus that we see most deeply in the cross are the most important things.
- In my home church, we used to have a lutefisk dinner. It was not a worship tradition but it became so important that people made the tradition too important.
  - Its mission at the beginning was to enhance the life of the Body of Christ, not take over the body of Christ's life. It is good to notice when congregational or personal traditions are getting so important, they take over the place of Jesus.
  - Don't think it is just pharisees who get into this trap. In the last year and a half we have struggled to remember that our relationship with God is the point of our congregations.... Our congregation is a social network God uses to deliver love, support and invite service to one another. We can become so focused on the externals of faithfulness, like caring for our building or our favorite programs that we neglect to examine our own hearts.
- I grew up among Norwegian Lutheran pietists.....who worked to renew God's Church and invite people to develop a living faith life....attending to God, deepening awareness of our sin, lifting up lay people's prayer and proclamation.
  - Maybe it was just me, but I found myself like the text today so worried about who was unclean or about staying undefiled by sin that I lost track of the fact that I was always a broken sinner, coming to worship at the church which was a hospital for sinners. We gathered to hear the Good News that God loved me and other people who were broken in and outside of our congregation. When our worship service concluded we would go to serve God somewhere else in our families, communities, reaching out to people who are different but still deeply loved and valued by God.
- Today Jesus makes clear to the religious leaders and people of his day that they are not defiled by what they eat or take into their body, but much more often we are defiled by the broken fruit of our complicated and sinful hearts.
- Our church is not God. People too often when I ask how they are doing in their faith life, begin to speak about church instead of talking about how they are doing in their spiritual journey and how they are helping others live out their faith life, too.

- When we think our practices, our piety, our traditions give us power over God...or we focus on them and not the people (our neighbors) who God loves who needs support, we are getting into trouble like Jesus talks about today.

Defilement – not what goes in but what comes out – food

- Evil comes from the human heart...
  - It is both a communal and an individual heart issue. My heart and our heart can get us into trouble.
- Jesus comes after the religious leaders of his time who focused on the external practices of washing their hands and worship vessels before worship.
- When mere customs become divine Law then Jesus wants to turn us around.
- That is what Luther was concerned about later with different things getting in the way. He was concerned about reforming the church of his time. We are called to do the same. When church craft/work/traditions overcome mercy and proclaiming God's grace, then we risk the turning of our church into an idol that takes the place that only God deserves to be.
- It is also easy to slide into self-righteousness – and it is also easy to slide into other forms of sin.
- It is our hearts that defile our relationships and lives and bring harm of many kinds to others.
- Even our best efforts can get twisted up in human sinfulness and take the place of God. The human in us keeps showing up.

How's your faith life?

Jesus in today's text calls us to go deeper - We often start by pointing out others with their problems....Slowly God calls us like Jesus to focus on our own heart –

- Do our own work – not focus on others
- See our need for God's grace
- Ask that God's grace becomes more a mark of our life.

When it comes to your faith life, what matters is not our faith, but it is Christ's faith.

- God's mercy – Christ's faith that comes from the outside of us is what really matters.
- Faith in God expressed in love of God and love our neighbors....Mercy, steadfast love from God is reflected into our lives and community.
- We respond to God's love through words and actions that build up rather than tear down our neighbors.

- What builds up faith and Christian community?
- Law is a witness to God....but not God. Law opens our hearts to hear the good news, that God is for us and with us, and will never let us go.

Jesus keeps calling us to follow.

- We get to be like him....Jesus got dirty in serving others.
- Touching the outcast
- Hanging around with the people who had blown it. Caring for the folks the world casts away
- Loving people who were seeking to destroy him.

One of my teachers says it best.

*True faith is not about clean hands.....it is about a heart cleansed by God and a life shaped by the radical, self-giving love of God we know best in Christ Jesus....*

The cross of Jesus and God's resurrecting grace keeps reclaiming us day after day after day. Thanks be to God.

Quote not used in the sermon:

*As our souls prosper, we shall be more and more sensible, not only of the outside, but of the inside. We first battle with the outward man, but as we advance in the divine life, we have nearer views of the chambers of imagery that are in our hearts. And one day after another we shall find more and more abomination there, and consequently we shall see more of the glory of Jesus Christ, the wonders of that Immanuel who daily delivers us from this body of sin and death. If we grow in the divine life, our heads will grow as well as our hearts, and the Spirit of God leads us out of abominable self, and causes us to flee more and more to that glorious and complete righteousness that Jesus Christ wrought out. The more your souls prosper, the more you will see of the freeness and distinguishing nature of God's grace, that all is of grace. I mention this, because we ought not to make persons offenders for a word; we should bear with young Christians, and not knock a young child's brains out because he cannot speak in blank verse.*

—George Whitefield

*[George Whitefield, in 20 Centuries of Great Preaching, ed. Clyde E. Fant, Jr., and William M. Pinson, Jr. (Waco, TX: Word, 1970), III, 165.]*