

What Comes Out

Mark 7:14-23

It's that time of year again. As we enter into fall, we also move into cold and flu season. The new school year brings people together who were spread out this summer, and now they've returned to Ames with all of the germs they brought with them. Smoke from wildfires and dust raised up from harvest fill the air, making allergies act up. Germs are everywhere, and we're worried about catching something.

To protect ourselves from them, we use lots of soap and hand sanitizers. Classroom supply lists don't just include pencils and crayons – they include hand sanitizers and Lysol wipes. We do what we can to keep ourselves clean, and keep germs away and outside of us.

The Pharisees' obsession with cleanliness isn't about staying germ-free. Although some of their rules may seem to have that effect, pouring a bit of water over dirty hands may be better than nothing, but isn't quite that helpful. Instead, they were concerned about ritual cleanliness. They followed the rules from Leviticus and elsewhere where God had commanded them to be holy, set apart. And so they weren't supposed to be in the presence of death or sickness or unclean things. But the Pharisees had added their own traditions onto what God had commanded, and had put their trust in their abilities to keep themselves ritually clean.

Jesus knew that wasn't going to work. Their problem wasn't that they were being made unclean by what was outside them. Their problem was they were unclean because of what was inside them. Jesus had hooked them up to a spiritual heart monitor, and had seen the real source of the problem. "Evil things come from within, and they defile a person"

We have the same problem. Uncleanness has nothing to do with what we take into our body or with what we touch or what touches us. Instead, it has everything to do with what's inside us, what's in our heart. And when what is in our heart comes out, we defile not just ourselves, but those around us.

If John 3:16 is "the gospel in a nutshell," then Mark 7:21-23 is a nutshell of the Law. "From within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting,

wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

There's a rule on the internet – don't feed the trolls. Another is similar – don't read the comments. When people are able to say whatever they want without fear of retribution or humiliation, the hatred and vile and foulness is astounding. Even among those who claim to follow Jesus or be doing his work.

As tempting as it is sometimes to label evil as something out there, it's instead important to remember evil is in here. It is in us. And if we don't acknowledge that, if we don't think we could fall to temptation, we can't battle it. Only when we face our own heart of darkness can we begin to let the light shine in.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote a book about his time in the gulags of the former Soviet Union entitled *The Gulag Archipelago*. One of the most famous passages in it reads, "If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being."

If our hearts are only full of evil thoughts, then maybe we do just need a Pharisaic legal structure in place. After all, if our hearts are the problem, then maybe we need something outside of us to help keep them in check. If we just come up with the right boundaries, the right rules and regulations, then we can control our hearts, or at least our actions. But that doesn't deal with the root of the problem.

Several years ago, a student was struck and killed by a CyRide bus on the corner of Lincoln Way and Ash, which prompted a study of traffic safety. When the results came out last summer, they were somewhat surprising. The problem was not with the road. The geometrics, sight distance and lighting of the area complies with current design guidelines, and traffic operations in the peak hours are also within acceptable ranges, according to the project consultant's report. Instead, the problem is with the people themselves. Compliance with the traffic lights, the walk and don't walk signs, was less than fifty percent, and that doesn't

include all the people who walk across in places where there are not crosswalks or traffic signals. The problem isn't something outside. It's something inside.

Because the problem is internal, it's not something we can fix on our own. As much as we may want to, we can't go in and take our hearts out on our own. But we're not on our own. In the introit today from Psalm 51, we pray with King David, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10). David knows his heart is unclean. He knows that what came out of his heart; lust, anger, and pride; led to adultery and murder and lies and an attempted cover-up. David knew his heart was sinful, and that had led to the death of a loyal soldier and an innocent baby, a series of events that broke every commandment. It only took one confrontation with the prophet Nathan for him to see the darkness of his own heart, how he had defiled the throne he sat in, the God he represented, and himself.

Yet the Bible calls David a man after God's own heart. How could that be? He's a murderer and adulterer, and that's just one of the several stories in the Bible that show David in a negative light. But if he is pure and holy, it is because God answered his prayer of repentance. God created a clean heart within him. God purged him, cleaned him, washed him, and made him whiter than snow (Psalm 51:7). And God does the same thing for you and me. Yes, we are sinners; but when God looks at us, he sees us with the clean hearts He has transplanted within us.

None of us can make our own hearts pure. That's why God needs to do spiritual heart surgery on us. He needs to remove our wicked, corrupt hearts, hardened by sin, and replace them with a pure heart of his own making. He needs to remove our heart of stone and give us a heart of flesh beating and pumping with the blood of Jesus. God does that through the forgiveness of Jesus. "I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 36:26).

The pure in heart are blessed because God makes us pure. The Blood of Jesus washes away our sins and gives us a clear conscience so that we can stand before God in his presence without being rejected or destroyed. As God's forgiven children by faith, we

become more and more like him each day as we hear his Word, receive his forgiveness, and receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus in Holy Communion.

God speaks a word from the outside, a word of forgiveness, in order that it becomes a word inside us, unseating our intentions and seating us to feast on God's grace, God's mercy and God's righteousness. In Lord's Supper, we receive into our own bodies Jesus' body and blood. We receive that which we could not make or earn ourselves: forgiveness and new life. From the table we rise, taking Jesus into our world through our flesh.

In the 2003 remake of *The Italian Job*, one of the repeated bits of advice is "I trust everyone. It's the devil inside them I don't trust." We cannot trust our hearts. We cannot trust the devil inside us, the sin that dwells within us. We can trust the God who has promised to give us clean hearts. We can trust the God who came into the world in Jesus, to fulfill the law and take the punishment our sin deserves.

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