

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 29: 13-16
SECOND LESSON: Mark 7:1-8; 14-15; 21-23
September 1, 2024
ORDINARY COMMUNION

“The Problem Starts Within”

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Every community has someone like Mildred. Mildred was the town and church gossip, the self-appointed arbiter of morals. Mildred had standards, and she made sure everyone knew if someone wasn't living up to them. People feared drawing the attention and ire of Mildred who could ruin a reputation in just a few hours. Then Mildred made a mistake. She went after a new church member named Harold. She saw Harold's pickup truck parked in front of the town's only bar one afternoon, and quickly spread the word that he must be an alcoholic.

Harold was a man of few words. When word of the rumors got to him, he just stared into space for a few minutes thinking. He didn't explain, defend, or deny. He said nothing. But later that evening, Harold quietly parked his pickup in front of Mildred's house and left it there all night.

The Pharisees from Jerusalem had their eye on Jesus and his followers. They were looking for something, anything, with which to nail them. And they finally found something. Not all of the disciples washed their hands before eating. Our immediate response is of course they should wash their hands! But not for religious reasons, for hygienic ones. We are very aware of the viruses and bacteria all around us. But people in the 1st century didn't know anything about germs. The type of hand washing practiced by the Pharisees was a symbolic act not a practical one. Only a small amount of water was used to wash away ritual defilement. The Pharisees followed what Jesus referred to as the “Tradition of the Elders,” later called the Oral Law or Mishnah. What they did was to take a biblical law that applied only to priests going into the tent of meeting or near the altar (Exodus 30:18-21) and applied it to all people in much wider terms. They set a new standard. But not everyone got the memo. At the time of Jesus there were many different interpretations and practices. These particular Pharisees and scribes were from Jerusalem, which may have added to the problem, because the Jerusalem clergy tended to believe themselves to be superior in thinking and practice to everyone else.

Jesus was clearly no fan of the “Traditions of the Elders.” He particularly objected to the legalism that often accompanied elevating tradition to the level of scripture. His response was confrontational: “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: “These people honor me with

their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.’ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”

Jesus publicly rebuked respected religious leaders. This was outrageous. But he wasn’t done shocking people. He then turned to the crowd and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.”

This may sound like common sense to us, but it is hard to underestimate just how integral the Jewish dietary laws were to Jewish life and as a result how jarring these words would have been. The dietary laws bound the community together. They served to separate the people from the surrounding nations. In the Empire where everyone was thrown together, the Jews still managed to stay apart. They had their own marketplaces and their own butchers. Things had to be done a certain way, and they abstained from participation in a lot of activities with Gentiles because of food. So for Jesus to say that what goes into a person does not make them unclean, but what comes out, was scandalous.

Jesus had already demonstrated his objection to the “Traditions of the Elders” in practice many times. His interpretation of the written law was also much broader than that of the Pharisees. He had the audacity to heal people on the Sabbath, touch lepers and bless an unclean woman who touched him. He spoke to Samaritans! He spoke to women. He put mercy and compassion first in all circumstances. The understanding of most religious people at the time of Jesus was that God was honored by the fulfillment of external legal requirements. Jesus, in line with the prophets, put the emphasis back on moral and ethical issues. It is not whether we complete a ritual or a prayer with accuracy that matters. It is not found in the perfect adherence to the laws of kosher. It is how we treat one another. We should be focused on the thoughts and feelings that result in behavior that causes harm to others, because what we nurture in our heart will come out in our actions. The list Jesus gives is not exhaustive, but many come from the Ten Commandments. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness, and You shall not covet. Sexual immorality, malice, lewdness, arrogance and folly are more general in nature. But all are from the heart, which is the center of who we are. Our heart is our personality, character and will. It’s where we live. The heart is the driving force behind our actions.

There are things that we do, and there are things that we think. But thinking comes first. When people succumb to temptation they do so in their mind first. But while we might not be able to stop every random and ungodly thought from making its way across our minds, we do have a choice about what we do with them. There isn’t a person alive who doesn’t have crazy thoughts. When Billy Graham’s wife was once asked if she ever contemplated divorce she replied, “divorce no, murder yes.” But we can either welcome thoughts or reject them. When we take a destructive thought and nurture it in

our hearts the problem begins. Humans are experts at rationalization. We can even make our aberrant behavior the fault of others. The abusive spouse can convince his victim that the abuse is their fault. If they had been obedient enough or good enough they wouldn't have been hit. Rationalizing is easy. We can always come up justifications for why we feel the way we do and why we are fully within our rights to do whatever it is we want to do.

The thought life problems Jesus listed are common to humankind. They sound dramatic when we read them out like we did today, but they are very ordinary. It's not just billionaires who are greedy. Two-year-olds are greedy. Malice isn't just about what happens in politics. It can find its way into neighborhoods and workplaces. Malicious thoughts can turn into malicious speech and cause enormous harm. And while we might not in our wildest dreams think we are guilty of lewdness, a great deal of what passes for entertainment today is lewdness personified. And at one time or another we all have envied or slandered someone in the form of gossip. We all look down on other people, and there are times when we all lack common sense.

The problem starts within. But Jesus doesn't give us an answer in this particular passage. He diagnoses the problem. Instead of fixating on external things that don't really matter, what we ought to be paying attention to is the condition of our own hearts. This is what God is paying attention to.

Scripture as a whole does give us answers as to what to do with our negative thoughts. Philippians 4: 8 says, "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things." Suppression doesn't work. Replacement does. When a toddler is fixated on going for the electrical socket, the best way to handle it is to redirect them. We can replace greed, envy and jealousy with gratitude. Gratitude is a powerful force. It can even work on resentment. Humility, or being right sized, removes arrogance. Recognizing the full humanity of others counteracts lewdness and lust because it's much harder to objectify someone who is a fully three-dimensional person with a past, a present and a future. Like that parent of the toddler, we can set the parameters for ourselves on what we watch on television or social media. We are not helpless. What we welcome into our hearts is what will come out in our lives.

Jesus said, "Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them." The Holy Spirit will help us. It is our calling from God to welcome the Holy Spirit to work fully in us and to transform us into the people we were created to be, full of love and grace. The problem starts within, but fortunately, God helps from within. Amen

Isaiah 29: 13-16

13 The Lord said:

Because these people draw near with their mouths
and honor me with their lips,
while their hearts are far from me

and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote,

14 so I will again do
amazing things with this people,
shocking and amazing.

The wisdom of their wise shall perish,
and the discernment of the discerning shall be hidden.

15 Woe to those who hide a plan too deep for the Lord,
whose deeds are in the dark,
and who say, “Who sees us? Who knows us?”

16 You turn things upside down!
Shall the potter be regarded as the clay?
Shall the thing made say of its maker,
“He did not make me,”
or the thing formed say of the one who formed it,
“He has no understanding”?

Mark 7:1-8; 14-15; 21-23

7 The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus² and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. ³ (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders.⁴ When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.

⁵ So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?”

⁶ He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

“These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.

⁷ They worship me in vain;
their teachings are merely human rules.’

⁸ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”

¹⁴ Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. ¹⁵ Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.”

²¹ For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder,²² adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. ²³ All these evils come from inside and defile a person.”