

Pentecost 14, August 29, 2021 (Mk 7:1-23; Ps 15; Dt 4:1-2, 6-9; Js 1:17-27)

What do you think? Are the Pharisees and scribes the *good guys* or the *bad guys*? Almost every time they're mentioned, it's in opposition to Jesus, who's *definitely* the "good guy."

But I think we need to have some compassion for them, because they really weren't just out to "get" Jesus. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law—the scribes—were the leaders of the Jews, the people God had both *chosen* and *set apart* from all other nations.

Their task was to keep their religion pure and undefiled. This was what God had commanded—and they, the religious leaders, were the *watchdogs* of their day.

God had given Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, and then another 603 laws, statutes, and ordinances to go with them. This is what the Jews call *Torah*, God's *teaching*, God's *instructions* to Israel.

But at the time of Jesus there was also the *oral* law, the tradition of the elders. These words and interpretations had been passed down from one generation to another since the time of the Exodus. The Pharisees considered this oral law to be just as weighty as the Law of Moses, the first five books of their scriptures: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.

We may think they were trying to bury God's law in ridiculous details, but that really wasn't the case. They wanted to please God in everything they said and did, so they used God's law to try to make every aspect of their lives *holy*.

In the eyes of the Pharisees and teachers, Jesus seemed to threaten the very core of Judaism, which was not only their *religion*, but also their *politics*, their *culture*, and their *very way of life*.

Jesus didn't have much patience with these religious watchdogs. He was on a mission. His first words in Mark's gospel were these: **The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the good news.**

In Mark' gospel Jesus speaks bluntly, directly. He doesn't care if he gives offense, and he doesn't pull any punches. Quoting Isaiah, his favorite prophet, he calls his challengers *hypocrites*. Even though they were fulfilling the letter of the law of Moses and the oral law, they weren't doing it for the right reasons.

They were so caught up in doing the right thing, they'd forgotten to honor and worship God, the God who'd told them what the right thing *was*: to love God with all their heart and soul and mind and strength, and to love their neighbor as themselves.

That's the background for today's gospel text. Into this passionate ritualistic obsession of the Pharisees and scribes steps Jesus, with a brand new and highly offensive message: ***Your purity codes won't save you!***

It's not what goes *into* you that defiles you, says Jesus—eating with unclean hands, or eating foods that have been declared unclean. Rather, the things that come *out of your heart* are what defile, what make you unclean.

The problem faced by the Jews of Jesus' day was, they'd been taught *they* were in charge of their own salvation. If they observed and followed all 613 laws, statutes, and ordinances, then God would bless them. He'd reward them in this earthly life, and take care of them always. That was their faith—their religion.

As Christians, we know better. We confess that **we're in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves**. Theologians used to call this *original sin*, meaning we inherited it from our parents. They in turn inherited it from as far back as Adam and Eve. Nowadays we don't look at it in quite the same way.

The Jews believed the *heart* was the center of human will, the seat of desires, decisions, and choices. It's normal and natural for us to seek our own good, our own welfare, our own pleasure.

And even though we try, through faith, to live in more loving and caring ways, when push comes to shove, the human heart and our human desires can't always be trusted to be God-oriented.

The only solution to this problem is one that comes from the outside, from God himself. God, who is *outside* of our unclean, defiling insides, comes into us to make us clean.

In the Lutheran tradition we believe he came to each of us first in baptism. Baptism is something the Jews knew about. In fact, the word is used in today's gospel in the original Greek of the text.

Mark, speaking of the religious leaders, tells us **they don't eat anything from the market unless they baptize it (*wash* it); and they also observe many other traditions, such as the *baptizing* of cups, pitchers, and kettles** (Mk 7:4). That gets lost in translation!

In holy baptism God entered your heart and continues to dwell there. **You were sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.** God came into you to free your heart from bondage to the uncleanness and defilement of sin.

I can no more cure the sin of my own heart than I could perform a heart transplant on myself. Sin resides in me and abides in me, and I can't get it out by myself.

It takes a power stronger than me to do that. It takes the power of God, working in my heart through the Holy Spirit given to me in my baptism, when God *drowned* the sinfulness of my heart and left it wide open to receive all his gifts.

If I had to go to the hospital for a heart transplant, I'd have to sign a whole bunch of papers, stating that I understood what was going to happen and consenting to the treatment. Without my permission, the procedure couldn't take place. Without my consent, my heart couldn't get fixed.

That's what it's like with sin. I *know* my heart is sinful and unclean, and I need God to make it right. But until I give my *consent* and let God actually *work* in my heart through his Holy Spirit, my heart won't begin to be healed.

We began today with the Pharisees and teachers complaining. Jesus' disciples weren't following the ritual cleanliness laws of the oral tradition, the tradition of the elders—the *religion* of the Jews. Listen now to a passage from one of my favorite authors, Robert Farrar Capon:

*Whatever the Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is, it is not a religion. In fact, it's the announcement of the **end** of religion. And what is religion? It's the human race's age-long preoccupation with the notion that there's something we can or should do to set ourselves right with God, or to get God to be nice, or to make the universe go more smoothly. . . .*

Religion is an attempt at control. . . . This is neatly summed up in the Epistle to the Hebrews: It is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats—or long prayers, or proper behavior—including washing hands in the right way—it's not possible that these things can take away sins.

*Only Jesus does that. . . . He announces, in his death and resurrection, that anything religion ever tried to do or ever would do, he has accomplished once and for all [end quote] ("In Us We Trust," in *The Door*, March/April 1989 #104; Stoffregen, p. 8). [somewhat reworded for ease of speaking]*

Do you hear the good news? There's nothing, *nothing at all*, that we can ever do to save ourselves—there's no point even in trying. But **God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him—or who even *wants to believe in him*—won't perish, but will have eternal life.**

And *that's* Good News! Thanks be to God!