

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, NM
Sunday September 2, 2018 Proper 17B
Theme: The Heart of the Matter
Text: Mark 7: 1-8,14-15,21-23
Preacher: Christopher McLaren

Worship is at the heart of everything we do. Each week as we gather as the people of God in this place we hear these words:

*Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known,
and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our
hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may
perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name;
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

They are familiar and powerful words that are known as the Collect for Purity.

The Collect for Purity acknowledges our nakedness before God. Our hearts are open, our desires are known, and our secrets are revealed. We stand in the light of God's truth and grace, asking for cleansing and inspiration. It is a vulnerable and good place to begin our worship.

The Collect for Purity is quite old, from the 11th century. It was found in the Sarum Mass, from Salisbury where it was said privately by the priest as part of the prayers for vesting for the Eucharist. But the 1552 Book of Common Prayer made this prayer part of the public rite and put it into the vernacular English so that all could hear and experience this prayer.

In the Hebrew mind the center of the person was the heart. It was the seat of the affections, the source of motivation, and the place of moral decision making. We can feel it in the words of the Shema: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength from Deuteronomy 6:5. It is the heart that matters above all else – the rest of the person follows its lead.

We've all had people tell us to follow our heart, and I don't think I've ever really heard someone say follow your liver, or just trust your pancreas and you can't go wrong. The assumption is that our hearts are at the center of us, and that our hearts cannot be easily deceived or co-opted. The trick I suppose is being able to listen to what our hearts have to tell us.

Recently, someone reminded me that they came to church to have their heart touched not just their head. They wanted the message of the Gospel to make the dangerous journey of 12 inches from their head to their heart. Religion is an activity of the heart it seems and we find Jesus making the same point in the Gospel of Mark.

At the core of the Jewish tradition is the double commandment to love God and to love your neighbor (Mark 12:29-30). This is the essential core of the faith, but as generations succeed one another, many traditions are added or created to adapt this love of God and neighbor to new situations. In theory, these traditions are always secondary to the center, to the loving heart of the tradition itself. However, in practice, as traditions grow, they take on a life of their own at times. The distinction between the essential center and the periphery, the heart and the lips are obscured. And the importance of embodying the center, the core of the faith is sometimes reduced to an obsession with externals.

We Episcopalians are quite comfortable with our traditions and find great comfort in them. There is nothing wrong with loving your traditions, in fact there is something wonderful and grounding about it. But there is a deep problem when the externals of life become more important than the core practices and ways of being so essential to spiritual growth and change within the human heart.

I remember a time in New Orleans a woman accosted me after church about how the acolytes had ruined her experience of worship because they had lit the candles in the wrong order from the outside in or from the inside out. I honestly can't tell you which way she thought it was supposed to be but it obviously had become so important to her that she had missed the entire point of the Eucharistic Feast.

We can think of other sad moments in our history when faithful worshipers became so disoriented and angry about a new revision of the Book of Common Prayer that they decided to break-away from the Episcopal Church to preserve something they loved more than unity.

Sometimes we mess with a tradition that we didn't know was off-limits for others. When we first began to have a small group on Sunday mornings that formed around the question of Race in America, I was somewhat shocked by people who didn't think it was appropriate to talk about such things in church. A few got upset and left the church, some criticized it from afar while many who were the most concerned about it never bothered to attend the conversations and see if they could engage the topic themselves as a matter of faith and loving one's neighbor. I have been deeply touched by hearing what simply being able to talk about race and prejudice and the history of oppression in our country has done for people who are themselves in need of a place to work out their own faith with fear and trembling and to be honest about their past and willing to change the way they think and feel about things that were a deep and disturbing part of their childhood experience.

What Jesus is doing in this passage is really quite difficult. He is attacking a kind of unexamined religious life that all human beings are prone toward falling into. The center and the heart are inside. They cannot be observed and measured directly. However, the traditions are external behaviors. We can scrutinize externals. The heart may be hidden: but hands are visible for inspection. Therefore, those who see

themselves as guardians of the tradition are often prone to monitoring and policing traditions. At its worst this amounts to asking trivial questions instead of the important ones. To focusing on the traditions of humans instead of the commandments of God

However, Jesus, in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, lives out of the center, out of the heart of God. He is a prophet who reminds those around him of the center and confronts hypocrisy when he sees it. He challenges people not to forget what the traditions are all about, they are meant to help people hold together the inner love God and neighbor and the outer ways that love should be embodied.

Quoting Isaiah Jesus rebukes the Pharisees, religious leaders of the day with which Jesus had a great deal in common, for reducing worship to something external, mechanical, and otherwise out of touch with its true intent.

Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written:

*This people honors me with their lips,
But their hearts are far from me;
In vain do they worship me,
Teaching human precepts as doctrines.*

In essence, Jesus is telling us, “God wants to transform the center of who you are, what makes you tick.” God wants all of you not just some comfortable part or partial access. Give me your heart, because if I have that, the rest of you will follow. The root meaning of the word religion, *re-ligio* to re-connect or to put the ligaments back into shape that connect us to God and one another that is the purpose of religion, connection, holding us close to God and one another. It’s not about the outward trappings of a spiritual life it is about relationship.

The famous western theologian St. Augustine, said it eloquently, “Inside every human heart is a God shaped space and our hearts our restless until they find their rest in God.

But how do we train our hearts? How do we heal them? In a real way the spiritual life is about heart care, not the low-cholesterol-you-really-need-to-exercise-kind – although that is probably true for many of us. No, we need heart care that opens the center of our lives up to God’s transforming presence. One could understand the Church as a kind of heart hospital. We come each week for our heart check-up, tuning into the sacred stories of our tradition, singing the hymns of our faith, saying our prayers, and feasting around the Holy Table in an effort to keep our hearts healthy, tender and sensitive to God’s ways and leadings, knowing that it is easy to deceive ourselves, easy to get lazy, too easy to allow the toxins that Jesus was talking about to take over from within.

Some of the most faithful and spiritually alive people I have met in my life are those who have for one reason or another been involved in 12-step groups whether Al-anon or AA or any number of others. What I have found in talking with those who have been helped and healed and held in life by being part of the 12-step process is that there are some really spiritually demanding aspects to their participation in these groups. One is deep honesty about their own inner life, their thoughts, temptations, thinking errors, failures, hidden desires, fears, and more. Those who engage their spiritual life in this way know that one cannot make progress if one is not willing to tell the truth, every day, without pretense and without apology. One does not seek spiritual growth because one considers it a luxury. One pursues spiritual growth because one's life, health, happiness and wholeness depend upon such openness.

There is not time to go through the entire 12-step process but over time I have become amazed at those who have given themselves to it, become honest with themselves, allowed others to look into their lives and hearts, learned to do a thorough self-inventory, learned to make amends with those whom they have injured or wronged, and also been taught how to deal with their resentments that only serve to poison their lives and limit their growth. I'm not trying to say that Jesus was really just telling all of us to get into a 12-step program. What I am saying is that at the core of spiritual growth is a willingness to examine the condition of one's inner life, one's heart and to tell the truth about what you find there.

Of course, Christians have developed many ways of trying to get at the inner person. One key to spiritual growth is listening to your life, to slow down enough to actually take stock of what is happening in your one wild and precious life. Christians have learned practices over the ages that help one to become attuned to their interior life. One of the key practices that some have been trying to recover is that of Sabbath, the practice of rest and reflection and renewal one full day a week that does not involve work, media, chores, etc. Another is silence. In the noise and chaos and inundation of our culture, silence is a radical decision. Practices closely related to silence are meditation and prayer. Becoming still and listening for the still small voice of God. Allowing yourself to believe that God wants to speak into your life. I know many people for whom journaling has been a life-line to growth and spiritual honesty and insight, a way of sounding the depths of one's experience. In addition, there are the classical Christian practices of spiritual direction or soul friends who help one to listen to their life with fresh eyes and guide one's steps into growing intimacy with God. These are only some of the ways to become open to the guiding of the spirit and to work at the center of your life that you might grow into the full stature of Christ as our baptismal vows proclaim.

One of the best ways to the human heart has been through story. Sacred Story has a way of getting the ways of God into our lives and close to the center of who we are. We live by stories it seems and the stories we choose to value and accept have a huge impact upon the shape of our lives and the health of our spiritual life. It is why we are concerned and vigilant about what our children take in through media or

read. It is why when we gather for worship each week one of the things we do each week without fail is to read from our sacred story, to remind us of who we are, to be convicted and challenged, and to allow the ways of God into our lives through the stories about how God has loved and revealed himself to a people throughout history struggling with us toward health and wholeness.

“But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children’s children.” (Deuteronomy 4:9).

Tell the story to your children and your children’s children. That is how you inculcate the values that are important to you, by telling your children stories, the stories of our faith, the stories of your successes and your failures. The stories that you believe will animate their hearts and lives, their religious imaginations in ways that will shape them into the soulful, friends of God you desire them to be. This is why we are so dedicated to our Godly Play program for children. We desire for them to know the stories of our faith, to make them their own through wondering and play and beauty. We know that we are narrative creatures and that we need the stories of God’s loving purposes within us to keep our hopes alive, and to arm us for the battle for our hearts and minds that is constantly raging around us and within us.

If we were to summarize this passage of scripture I think it is rather simple: God wants your heart.

I would like to end this sermon by saying the Collect for Purity together. You will find it on page 355 of the Book of Common Prayer:

*Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known,
and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our
hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may
perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name;
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