



A MAN WITH TWO HEARS

30 August 2009

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I think the gospel reading for today calls for a little set-up. Our reading just kind of dove straight into the object lesson, but it excluded the context in which Jesus was teaching. See, on the surface it seems like some sort of hygiene debate is going on, and without the context, I'm not sure you can really get at the heart of the matter.

So let's back up. Jesus and his disciples had just been at the market and they had picked up some food. Just as they sat down to eat –surprise, surprise – here come the Pharisees. As it turns out, some of the disciples hadn't washed their hands, and so the Pharisees were on the attack. What's that about?

Well, every week I Purell my hands after the 11 o'clock service. After shaking something like 300 hands, I figure chances are good that there's a little bacteria on my own hand. So before I eat, I ALWAYS sanitize my hands. But let's just say that today I forget. Do you think that Pastor Nieting would call the council together for a special meeting? Do you think our District President would get wound up? Chances are no. Chances are the worst that might happen to me is I get a cold or a stomach ache.

But the Pharisees were very upset, and here's why: there was a long-standing tradition among the Jewish people. After going to market, you wash your hands. Not because there might be germs on them. Germs weren't discovered for thousands of years. It's because there are gentiles in the marketplace, and it's just possible they might have touched one of those gentiles.

And all of this stemmed from their understanding of "cleanliness" or righteousness. The way the Pharisees saw it, Jewish people started clean, and the way to please God was to preserve your clean-ness throughout your entire life. So, not surprisingly, they were very insular – minimizing and avoiding contact with gentiles everywhere they could. And at the start of our reading today, it seems that the disciples are about to throw away their God-given cleanliness by eating with gentile-tainted hands.

And that brings us up to speed with our reading today. So let's listen again to Jesus' words: "Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.'" The way I'd like to phrase it is, "The world does not corrupt me."

That's one of those good news/bad news kinds of statements. Consider this: Did Jesus consider the Pharisees "clean?" Then what good did their efforts to avoid un-cleanliness do?

The problem wasn't the outside world. The problem was they *started* with unclean hearts, and building walls around themselves would never make those hearts clean.

That's why Jesus was so shocking, so scandalous, and so offensive to the religious community of his day. He didn't walk through life with a wall around himself. He actually mixed in with those sinners and gentiles on purpose. And he could do it with no problem, because he understood that sin outside of you can't hurt you. It's sin *inside* of you that's the real problem. And that's the sin we have the hardest time acknowledging.

The thing is, we generally don't think of ourselves as "bad people." In fact, there are probably a very small number of folks in your life that you'd feel okay in calling them "bad people." But I think that was Jesus' message to the Pharisees, "Guess what? You're bad people."

It's precisely because we're bad people that we feel we need to avoid temptation. Temptation is outside of me. But the fact that I *want* to give in to it, or even that I *can't stop myself* from giving in is what really shows what's in my heart. "I can't help it," isn't really an excuse here; indeed, it is an admission that there is a problem.

That's Jesus' central message to the Pharisees – and to us – in our scripture reading. It doesn't matter how good the outside stuff is: how noble, righteous, religious, kind, generous our actions may be (and ought to be). As long as our hearts are dirty, the rest of it is dirty too. You can fill your life with charity work and self-sacrifice, but if your heart is still sinful, all that apparent goodness is worthless to you. "The world does not corrupt me," because I'm thoroughly corrupt to begin with.

Sounds pretty harsh, doesn't it? Well it is. Most of his talks with the Pharisees are. Why? When Jesus faces off with Pharisees it's like an intervention. He sees people addicted to a life-stealing lie, and he's trying to break through to them before it's too late. And he can't offer them help until they are willing to admit the problem.

Now, don't get discouraged. Jesus wouldn't be trying to break-through to you if there was no hope for you. There *is* hope for people with unclean hearts. Christ Jesus is that hope. He gives us new hearts to the broken hearted.

That's what happens in baptism. It's what happens when our sins are confessed and forgiven. It's not just that our sin is taken away, but we're given entirely new hearts. That's what we mean when we say things like, "In Christ you are a new creation." It's not just taking away the bad, but Jesus makes something new and wonderful out of something unclean and broken. As a new creation, we can say, "the world does not corrupt me, because Christ lives within me." The outside world can't make dirty what Christ has made clean.

Which sounds good, but I have to be honest with you. I'm baptized. I'm a new creation with a new heart. But I am still tempted, and worse, I still sin. I still see myself as broken and unclean.

That's the paradox – or perhaps the burden – of being a Christian in our world. It's like there are two hearts within us: the sinner's heart and the saint's heart. It's a struggle, it's a war inside of ourselves. This is why a lot of people on the outside think Christians are hypocrites. Generally speaking, we are. I want to be righteous, and I'll tell you that you should be righteous, but I still find myself following my unclean heart.

That's why Christianity isn't a one-time event. It's not like, "Well, I'm baptized, so I'm done with all my Christian requirements." The Christian life is about *daily* relying on grace and mercy and forgiveness. It's about *daily* giving up that old heart and *daily* receiving a new one.

There's one more side to this that needs to be said. While I still struggle with my unclean heart, in God's eyes I'm totally clean. That's the hope and assurance that we Christians have. And when at last God calls us home to be with him, the old heart will be finally left behind and we will finally see ourselves the way God sees us: holy, perfected, and dearly loved Children of God.