

**Theme:** Hypocrisy and Formation of the Heart

**Scripture:** *For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come . . . and they defile a person. (Mk 7:21a, 23b)*

In today's gospel, a delegation of scribes and pharisees comes from Jerusalem to see Jesus, who is in Galilee preaching and teaching. They notice that some of Jesus' disciples are eating with unwashed hands and so they confront Jesus, asking: "*Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?*" The *tradition of the elders* referred to a body of oral laws and customs, handed down by rabbis from one generation to the next, that derived from interpretations of the Torah – that is, God's Law given to Moses. These oral laws and customs were intended to protect the Torah. It was like a "fence around the Law" to preserve its function by protecting the law from careless or inadvertent violations.<sup>1</sup> But by the time of Jesus, this body of tradition had grown so complex that it tended to conceal the Law's real intent. Jesus does not condemn the traditions of the elders but he does caution his hearers to remember the purpose for which the tradition was designed. Jesus recognized that it's sometimes easy to get so used to doing things in a certain way, to develop a tradition, that we forget the reason behind the tradition.<sup>2</sup>

There's a rather funny story about a cat that wandered into a monastery one day. The monks were quite taken with this cat and so adopted it as a sort of mascot, feeding it, petting it, and letting it have its run of the monastery. The cat took to following the monks into the chapel for their daily worship, but then the cat began jumping up on the altar every time the monks gathered for their daily prayers. The abbot finally had enough of this and told the brothers that if they were going to keep the cat they would have to tie the cat up during their worship times. This the brothers did: they put a leash on the cat, tying it up front and thus restricting it from jumping up on the altar. Many decades later pilgrims would sometimes visit this monastery and attend worship services. But then they wondered why a cat was ritualistically put on a leash and tied up front near the altar. When visitors would ask about this rite, the brothers would simply respond: "*This is the way we've always done our chapel services here.*"

How easy it is to have the externals of our rites and particular traditions take over, forgetting the underlying reason for those traditions and what's truly important.

We may laugh at this cat story but sometimes we can get just as infatuated with some of our own church rites (as mentioned in the children's message). A good friend of mine shared an experience she had when she attended a particular church for the first time. She and her husband

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<sup>1</sup>Williamson, Jr., Lamar. *Marl – Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1983) 134.

<sup>2</sup>Note: Traditions and rituals can be good things, important things. Traditions can enable us to keep our balance while "fiddling on the roof." Keeping traditions can provide us with a sense of belonging; identity; stability. Traditions can provide social cohesion between generations and within generations. Tradition and ritual can be healthy and helpful unless or until particular traditions or rituals begin to take on a life of their own, disconnected from the truth they seek to reflect.

had gone to the altar rail to receive communion, but, being unfamiliar with the “traditions” of that particular congregation, they had returned to their pew via the center aisle. She had just sat down and was praying when she felt a tap on her shoulder. Looking up, she stared into the stern face of an elderly usher who leaned over her and proceeded to chastise her, saying, “*You’re suppose to come back to the pew by the side aisle, not the center aisle.*” She was embarrassed and felt mortified by his chastisement and admits that it was a long time before she returned again to that church for worship.

I suspect this is what Jesus is talking about when the religious authorities challenge him about the behavior of his disciples and he responds by saying, “*You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition*” (Mk 7:8). But then Jesus goes much deeper, saying: “*There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile*” (Mk 7:15). Then Jesus adds: “*For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come . . . and they defile a person*” (Mk 7:21a, 23b). This disconnect between what’s inside of us in our hearts and what we show to the world has a name: it’s called **HYPOCRISY**.

Hypocrisy is a tendency to believe that by being deeply committed to a cause, or following the proper externals of religion, or holding tenaciously to some philosophical principle, we can then justify and get away with bad behavior, disregarding how our actual outward actions might affect others with whom we interact. One woman commented that her minister husband was Winnie the Pooh when he was at church but became Adolf Hitler when he came home. Hypocrisy tends to be very self-deceptive, dressing itself up as an “angel of light.” The 20<sup>th</sup> cy. author and playwright, W. Somerset Maugham, has written:

*“Hypocrisy is the most difficult and nerve-wracking vice any man [one] can pursue; it needs an unceasing vigilance and a rare detachment of spirit. It cannot, like adultery or gluttony, be practiced at spare moments; it is a whole time job.”<sup>3</sup>*

Hypocrisy would have us believe that by following the proper externals of religion, we don’t have to tend to the internals of our heart. Unfortunately, hypocrisy is a temptation for every Christian.

So . . . what are we to do? First, we can all prayerfully ask God to help us recognize the disconnect between what we profess to believe and how we actually behave. We can exercise vigilance in regularly examining what we do and why we do it through such spiritual practices as journaling, prayer, and spiritual direction. We can each ask ourselves: “Does my behavior actually match up with what is revealed in scripture.

Second, we can seriously and intentionally open ourselves to the task of “Christian Formation” by seeking out places and communities where God’s Holy Spirit can work within us to transform our hearts into the very image of Christ’s own heart. One way to do this is to become part of a small group where the members know and love each other and will hold each other accountable: where one can share honestly about what’s going on in one’s life and then pray about it with one another; where there are others who will, in fact, tell us the truth about ourselves.

Many years ago I was part of a small prayer group with three other women. One day, one of these ladies began sharing that she felt other people often avoided her and didn’t want to be with her.

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<sup>3</sup>W. Somerset Maugham in *Cakes and Ale*. Quoted in *Synthesis*, October 31, 1999, p. 3.

The truth was that she was absolutely right about this. She was one of those persons who often complain about everything; no matter what the situation she would find something to dislike or criticize. As might be expected, many people found it difficult to be around someone who was always so negative, feeling like they were being dragged down into a dark pit right along side her. So this woman was quite correct in her perception; people often did try to avoid her. But what did we three prayer-buddies say when this woman shared her quite accurate self-perception? We immediately tried to be “nice.” We told her, “Oh no, that’s not true; people really like you.” Ever since that meeting, I’ve often thought about that experience because we had a perfect opportunity to help this woman – following the advice given in Ephesians, to speak the *truth in love* (Ephesians 4:15) and gently relay why some people found it difficult to be around her. Unfortunately, we three truly failed this woman in our need to be “nice.” What she needed were friends who would love her enough to speak the truth. We all need others who will love us enough to tell us the truth about ourselves, even when it might not sound “nice.”

On the other hand, sometimes we don’t perceive ourselves as accurately as others may perceive us. So we need to ask friends who know us well to speak the *truth in love* to us. But then in turn, we need to take to heart such words offered in love and ask God for help so that our inward heart begins to more closely align with our outward behavior. For today’s Sermon Hymn we will sing the short hymn, *Change My Heart, O God*. It’s a simple prayer that God will change our hearts and mold us as a potter molds clay.

Third, we can take seriously the admonishments and advice of James in the epistle reading this morning: *Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger* (James 1:19); *“Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves”* (James 1:22); *Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world”* (James 1:27).

This week the media news has been filled with the death of Senator John McCain and his funeral yesterday at Washington National Cathedral. Knowing his death was quickly approaching, Senator McCain planned his own funeral and intentionally reached out and asked several people, including two former presidents, George W. Bush (a Republican) and Barak Obama (a Democrat) to give eulogies. McCain had run against both of these two men in elections and lost. What was striking about all the eulogies was the consistency they portrayed in John McCain’s life between what he believed – his internal values and principles – and his outward behavior. He was highly respected and admired by “both sides of the aisle.” It was also made clear that McCain would be the first to admit he was not a perfect man and had made mistakes, but then he would acknowledge those mistakes, apologize for them, and then move on. Watching that funeral, I found myself both uplifted and inspired by McCain’s example. We can all strive to emulate the examples of others whose inward heart and outward life seem consistent.

Finally, we can intentionally seek to be ***“doers of the Word”*** as James exhorts us. One way to do this is to participate next week in God’s Work-Our Hands, when we as a congregation try to reach out in compassionate action for the sake of those around us. It’s an opportunity to match what we say we believe as Christians with our outward actions. The national ELCA has provided a short video describing this work. I invite you to watch the video as you consider James’ words: *“Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves”* (James 1:22).

VIDEO: God’s Work. Our Hands (~3 min.)