

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

JESUS' CONTAGIOUS CLEANLINESS

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

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Analysis by Carolyn Schneider

1Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, 2they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. 3(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; 4and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) 5So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" 6He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; 7in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' 8You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." 14Then he called the crowd again and said to them, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: 15there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. 21For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, 22adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. 23All these evil things come from within, and they defile a

person.”

DIAGNOSIS: Spreading Uncleaness

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Keeping Clean from the Outside*

It is our tradition as human beings to distinguish between the clean and the unclean, the acceptable and the unacceptable. The unclean is out there, that is, where other people and things and customs are. The clean is in here, that is, where I am. We do not want to be defiled, and so we wash our hands of all contact with anything that is unclean. Jesus saw the Pharisees and scribes who came to him adhering to this tradition.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Defiling from the Inside*

Jesus points out to them that God is concerned with the inside, not the outside. Jesus works to bring the inside out, so that we can see what God sees. This exposes our hearts, and our hearts are not clean. Our neat distinctions between those who are clean and those who are defiled get blurry because the same stuff comes out of each heart. Jesus keeps pulling out a long string: sexual immorality, theft, killing, adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, indecency, an evil eye, blasphemy, arrogance, foolishness, and on and on. It seems that our hearts look pretty much alike; we have uncleaness in common, and it is contagious. What we do defiles and hurts others.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *The contagion must be stopped*

To listen to Jesus' list of germs of the heart is to hear each of the commandments of God being broken. The tradition that God handed down has not been kept. Up to this point in Mark's gospel, Jesus has been busy with unclean people. He has been

casting out unclean spirits, healing, and raising the dead. Now it becomes clear that an unclean spirit must be taken out of our hearts to stop their pumping out uncleanness. But this heart stoppage is fatal to the unclean heart.

PROGNOSIS: Spreading Cleanness

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Receiving a New, Clean Heart*

We try to stop Jesus' heart before he can stop ours. Those whose hearts Jesus has exposed put him to death as a sinner. In Mark's gospel, Jesus has become so accustomed to erasing the boundary between the clean and the unclean that he dies uncertain of his own cleanliness, holding all things in common with us. Martin Luther called Jesus on the cross "the only sinner" in the world because he shared the sin of all (Luther, Lectures on Galatians, 1535, vol. 26 of Luther's Works, American Edition [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963], pp. 280-281). But his resurrection demonstrated that his cleanliness is more powerful than our uncleanness. Jesus' cleanness is so contagious that it infected his heart when it was so full of our unclean spirit and made our hearts new and living with God's Holy Spirit. From out of the heart of the resurrected Jesus, the Holy Spirit does her contagious internal work, spreading heart to heart, words to ears.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Cleansing from the Inside*

James calls Jesus "the implanted word" (James 1:21). His goodness is an inner contagion that gives us a new birth, baptizing not our dishes (the Pharisees and scribes washed their cups and bowls to stay clean) but our hearts. Jesus continues his custom of making all things common, the unclean and the clean. He shares our uncleanness and we share his cleanness, and his cleanness is stronger than our uncleanness. That is how he

and we can now be so confident that when he is with and in us, we are clean in God's eyes.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Keeping Unclean Hands*

If Jesus has been so free from the anxiety of keeping himself clean that he has shared our uncleanness to death in order to infect us with his cleanness, then no wonder his disciples feel free to forget to wash their hands. They are no longer thinking about who is clean and who is not and how they can stay on the clean side of that calculation. Jesus gave his disciples authority over unclean spirits, too (Mark 6:7), and so we are sent out to handle what is unclean with Jesus' cleansing life. Will we be defiled in the process? Absolutely. But we know what to do with that; it goes with Jesus to the cross to get sanitized in his risen life for us and for others.