

Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23
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“Inside Out”

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Gatorade is a sports drink invented by the University of Florida years ago to help athletes replenish their bodies when engaging in athletic practice or competition. You may remember an early Gatorade commercial where highly tuned athletes soaked with perspiration would drink some Gatorade, some drank the red, others the purple or green... as they tilted their head back to drink the viewer would see the beads of perspiration turn the color of the Gatorade they were drinking. It's a very vivid image of something coming out of one's body.

That Gatorade commercial came to mind this week when I heard Jesus say, “It isn't what goes into the body that defiles, it is what comes out of it.” Many of us perk up when we hear Jesus say these words because we know what goes into the body can actually really mess us up.

But Jesus is speaking of another source of corruption. Not the outside stuff that goes in, but the inside stuff that comes out. We see some Scribes and Pharisees come to Jesus and ask why his disciples do not wash their hands according to “the Tradition of the Elders.”

What was this, “tradition of the Elders?” Well these are rules and laws made by humans seeking to help interpret God's law. See, sometimes God's law provided very clear instructions on the way to live your life and how certain situations should be handled. Other times, God's law seemed more like a general principle that might be open to interpretation.

Over time a group of ancient legal scholars got together because they believed as long as some laws had this, “fluidity,” then the door was open for all the laws to be “fluid.” So some Jewish leaders developed thousands of other rules as a kind of “fence” around some of God's laws in order to keep them from being broken. These other rules became part of an oral tradition called, “the tradition of the elders,” and was passed down generation to generation until it became common practice. As it became common practice it eventually got elevated to the status of Law.

So today we hear a question arise related to the Tradition of the Elders which stated that food, even clean food, could defile a person if they ate that food with unwashed hands. So when the disciples begin to dig in without washing their hands, the Pharisees and scribes got concerned and asked Jesus about it.

But Jesus turns the tables inside out. Jesus knows it is easier to follow a set of rules, maybe even begin feeling a little high and mighty about ourselves; than it is to examine one's own heart. To take an honest look at our own motivations, which dwell deep inside, sometimes hidden from us – and when they remain unchecked they sometimes bring out an ugly or “un” loving side of us.

For instance, during the late 1990's I was in an interview for a position as Interim pastor at a congregation in Southeast Michigan. The church people seemed delightful. I asked if the

church allowed children to take communion and a member of the committee told me children could receive communion after confirmation but not before, that was a treasured tradition.

Just after the interview, another member of the committee told me a story to reinforce how seriously they enforced this tradition, she said, “one Sunday we had a family visit our church and I noticed they let their child take communion. So after church I went over to them, I welcomed them and thanked them for visiting, then I said, very nicely, ‘you need to know that this church does not allow children to take communion until they are confirmed, if you want that you will have to go somewhere else.’” Guess what? That family went somewhere else!!

This group of Pharisees and Scribes were not just worried about the disciple’s hands, but their souls too; they knew Jesus and his followers were doing a lot of other things that tradition considered to be “dirty.” Touching the sick, healing on the Sabbath, freeing people from demons, forgiving people (which many believed was reserved only for God), eating with outcasts, hanging out with Gentiles. They had a lot of dirt on their hands. And any one of these made them “unclean,” and therefore unable to enter the temple or participate in much of society.

Jesus and his disciples were trying to invite the ancient world into a new understanding of what it means to live faithfully. Jesus was teaching how to live from the heart, and because of this, their lives were considered dirty by this group of Scribes and Pharisees.

Jesus’ response is magnificent. He essentially is saying how this wall of tradition, sometimes blinds people to the commandment of God.

I love the awareness we heard in the children’s message a little earlier, responding to Jesus’ comment, a man says, “That must mean that some people who look clean are really dirty...” and Jesus adds, “some people who have no place to wash and no clean clothes to put on— those people may look dirty, but they may be very clean inside. If they are kind to others and try their best to live God’s way, then they are clean.”

So I began to think of other implications of this idea of turning inside out. The Center for Progressive Renewal, a United Church of Christ consultant group, opens their website by saying, “We Believe that Your Church’s Best Days are Ahead.” CPR supports church renewal “by training entrepreneurial leaders, supporting the birth of new congregations, renewing and strengthening existing churches, and growing a network of progressive ministries that support and nourish each other and bring about a more just and generous world.”

A recent email from CPR shared a powerful story about how St. Mark’s United Methodist Church, through their work with CPR turned from focusing only on themselves and their survival and reached out to serve their neighbor, the email closed with this reminder, “The Center for Progressive Renewal turning the church inside out.”

As I further consider Jesus' words, I think of human vulnerability. I was reminded of a prayer in the UCC Book of Worship which captures human vulnerability so well, It's pretty long so I will only share a few lines, "Turn back, O God, the outer layer of ourselves, and look beneath the surface to our hidden inner depths. Many of us hide behind polite dreams and wooden responses—not daring to admit to others or even to ourselves that we are vulnerable. Yet we turn to you, trusting, knowing that you will handle us carefully and tenderly." As the prayer continues we hear that vulnerability includes laying open our own places of fear, overconfidence, over certainty, and trusting not only God, but each other to handle us with care and tenderness.

At the center of Jesus' message today is good news for those who seek to live from the heart. Parker Palmer, a Christian author writes:

"Heart, comes from the Latin *cor* and points not merely to our emotions but to the core of the self. The center place where all of our ways of knowing converge – intellectual, emotional, sensory, intuitive, imaginative, experiential, relational, spiritual and bodily, among others.

The heart is where we integrate what we know in our minds with what we know in our muscles, the place where truth and knowledge move out of our thoughts and become embodied and we find ourselves more human.

Today Jesus encourages us to go through life with a heart broken open; broken open to truth, broken open to suffering, broken open to one another, and broken open to God. For through the broken open heart, we will meet God, we will meet our neighbor, and we will discover more about ourselves.

The words from a loved church hymn come to mind as we close, "Take our hearts, take and seal them, Seal them for the courts above."

Amen