

The Heart of The Matter

James 1:19-27

Mark 7:1-8

For the next twelve weeks, we'll move chronologically through Mark. In this passage in Mark 7, Jesus follows the teachings of the prophets and makes them his own. The Old Testament prophets are frequently critical of hollow or hypocritical religion, and in particular of religious veneers covering up deeper desecrations. *You sing pretty songs of praise - but neglect the widow and the orphan! You follow the minor laws - but ignore the major ones!* Like the ancient prophets, he speaks as a Jew from within Jewish tradition, critiquing some religious leaders of the day; in this case some Pharisees (literally, "pure ones").

Jesus doesn't oppose their zeal for the law, or their reliance on tradition, or their purity practices themselves. Jesus condemns their actions to try to catch others in small infractions, even as they themselves commit much larger ones. To borrow the famous image from the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, they point out the speck in their neighbor's eye while ignoring the log in their own (Matthew 7:3-5). Thus Jesus' counter-critique isn't directed against "legalism," traditionalism, or purity practices per se, but rather against a disconnect between the heart and actions! Jesus is speaking against judgment of others, hypocrisy, and distorted priorities.

James says we should avoid being "hearers of the word and not doers," the idea is that the Gospel should engage both mind and heart, intellect and will. Think of Jeremiah's declaration that God's new covenant will be "written on their hearts," such that *doing* God's will becomes second nature (Jeremiah 31:33-34). With his repeated references to "the heart" in this week's passage, Jesus reminds the listener of their tradition and ancient teaching.

The Pharisees complain to Jesus that his disciples were not following the law and tradition of faithful Jews. They were not washing their hands before eating. We think this is a good hygienic thing to do. For them it was about being faithful to God.

Jesus quotes Isaiah and says "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." For the Israelites the heart was the seat of the will, true identity, wisdom and character. We are told God looks upon the heart and the heart shows our true selves.

We say everyone should do some soul searching. Jesus says everyone should do some searching of the heart. That's the first thing that we should notice about these verses from Mark 7. The Pharisees, the crowds, the disciples are all called to an examination of just how much their religious acts, their various rituals, even their dedication to following God's law actually correlate with the love they profess in their hearts. It's a hard truth to hear and asks us to examine how more often than not our faith lives seem disassociated from what we think we believe or what we want to believe. Do our actions match our words? Do we live out the faith we proclaim? The heart can have in it both good and evil. And following Jesus will require a rather constant vigilance to just what side of the heart is showing its true colors.

This scripture is not about beating ourselves up about how we fall short. It is about reminding us about the discipline and effort it takes to live out the words we profess in our everyday actions. Praying the prayer "Create in me a clean heart, O God" helps us walk our talk.

No one is exempt from a strong searching of the heart. But maybe we can hear grace in these words, because our searching, earnestly and intently, could lead ourselves and others to finding God's heart. The promise is God will soften our hearts, transform our hearts, unmask our hearts, and in the end write a new covenant on our hearts. And little by little, by the merciful grace of God, our life together is a pilgrimage of transformation. This is a journey we are invited to travel again and again. For God loves us fiercely and deeply, and has promised to give us new hearts for a new day, so that we might increasingly become not only hearers but also living out our faith as if it is second nature, written on our hearts!

Think about it – Pray about it – Live it

Bob