

“Have You Had Your Heart Checked Lately?”

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

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This morning our attention is drawn to one of the most combative conversations Jesus had. You get the feeling when you read this passage that sparks were going to fly by the way Mark describes the setting.

The scribes and Pharisees surrounded Jesus while he was eating, which gives me the impression they wanted to intimidate and trap him. Their opening question to Jesus made it clear these religious leaders from Nazareth and Jerusalem were not there representing Welcome Wagon so they could offer encouragement and assistance.

“Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with ‘unclean’ hands?” they asked Jesus. (Mark 7:5) Sounds like something your mother might say, doesn’t it?

Lest you misunderstand, though, the scribes and Pharisees were not concerned about getting rid of germs, but preserving long standing religious traditions. The ‘clean hands’ they referred to had to do with purification rights, not hygiene.

According to ancient law in Leviticus, the Jews were required to go to extreme measures to wash the world’s filth off their hands and possessions before they did anything holy. Since the world they came in contact with was dirty, a reference to anyone who was not Jewish or anything that was not clean by their standards, they needed to do more than swipe their hands through a trickle of water if they wanted to be ceremonially clean.

Evidently, the disciples did not wash their hands good enough to satisfy this unholy alliance of religious leaders looking for a reason to confront Jesus. The disciples' lack of attention to the purifications rituals provided the scribes and Pharisees the ammunition they needed to attack Jesus.

“Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?” the scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus while completely encircling him so he had no way to escape.

In typical fashion, Jesus did not directly answer their question. Instead, he quoted a passage from Isaiah which depicted his accusers as hypocrites.

“Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites. As it is written: ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.” (Mark 7:6-7 with a reference to Isaiah 29:13)

I don't know if the scribes and Pharisees expected to catch Jesus off guard and unnerve him with their 'gotcha' question, but if they did, it did not happen. Instead, Jesus seized this opportunity to expose their insincerity and to teach his own disciples what was important to God.

“Again, Jesus called the crowd to himself and said, ‘Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. 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*.’” (Mark 7: 14-16)

Later, Jesus said to his disciples when they were alone, “Are you so dull? Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him *unclean*? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach and then out of his body.” In saying this, Jesus declared all foods *clean*. (Mark 7:18-19)

He went on to say, “What comes out of a man is what makes him *unclean*. For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery,

greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make man *unclean*.” (Mark 7:20-23)

How does this passage speak to us this morning? I pondered this for some time last week and want to share these ideas with you.

It is possible for religious people to focus their attention upon the wrong things. This particular group of scribes and Pharisees did.

It appears they valued clean hands more than clean hearts, which was completely contrary to the way Jesus thought, believed, taught and lived. I am confident Jesus followed some of the ancient religious customs outlined in Leviticus, but he did not dwell on them or make keeping them the measure of one’s spirituality.

Jesus was far more concerned about what was in a person’s heart than what was in their stomach or even how it got there. The center of Jesus’ attention and teaching was the health of one’s heart.

“Blessed are the pure in heart,” Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “for they will see God.” A clean heart, one devoted solely to serving God, was more important to Jesus than any rule or ritual.

Why? For starters, Jesus knew this was most important to God.

What did God say to Samuel when he went to Jesse’s house in Bethlehem looking for King Saul’s successor and selected Jesse’s oldest son, Eliab? “Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” (1 Samuel 16:7)

Why is God so concerned about what is in a person’s heart? The heart has to do with a person’s will, motives and character, and God knows a heart polluted and contaminated by the evils of this world will bring the worst out in a person and corrupt their community. Unclean hearts lead to unwise decisions and bring untold suffering upon people.

Years ago, the positive thinking pastor of the Marble Collegiate Church in New York, Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, preached a sermon titled, “A Clean Engine Runs Smoothly and Delivers Power.” He saw this sentence on a sign in front of a service station and mechanic shop. You can imagine how he related this advertisement to the human heart.

It is true, though. Our lives run more smoothly, and we have more sustainable energy when our hearts are clean and pure.

What does a clean heart look like? I have to believe it looks like Jesus’. It is honest, trustworthy, reliable, dependable, respectful, kind, compassionate, humble, joyful, unselfish, forgiving, strong, courageous, generous, encouraging, inclusive, resilient and helpful.

Is this what your heart looks like? When is the last time you checked your heart to see what is in it?

Good hearts can go bad, you know, even hearts that beat in the chests of religious people who follow every dietary rule and purification ritual. Apparently, this happened to the scribes and Pharisees who surrounded Jesus that day while he was eating.

On the other hand, with God’s help, bad hearts can be redeemed. Contaminated hearts can be cleaned and made to run more smoothly through a transforming relationship with God.

“Create in me a clean heart,” David cried out to God in Psalm 51. His got really messy and dirty.

Has yours?