

## *Truer Words Were Never Spoken*

Mark 7.1-23 (*The Message*; adapted for worship)

August 30, 2009

"...grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs one's life, and it is grace because it gives one the only true life."

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer (adapted)

### *The Reading*

<sup>1-4</sup>The Pharisees, along with some religion scholars who had come from Jerusalem, gathered around him. They noticed that some of his disciples weren't being careful with ritual washings before meals. The Pharisees—Jews in general, in fact—would never eat a meal without going through the motions of a ritual hand-washing, with an especially vigorous scrubbing if they had just come from the market (to say nothing of the scourings they'd give jugs and pots and pans). <sup>5</sup>The Pharisees and religion scholars asked, "Why do your disciples flout the rules, showing up at meals without washing their hands?" <sup>6-8</sup>Jesus answered, "Isaiah was right about frauds like you, hit the bull's-eye in fact: These people make a big show of saying the right thing, but their heart isn't in it. They act like they are worshiping me, but they don't mean it. They just use me as a cover for teaching whatever suits their fancy, ditching God's command and taking up the latest fads." <sup>9-13</sup>He went on, "Well, good for you. You get rid of God's command so you won't be inconvenienced in following the religious fashions! ... You scratch out God's Word and scrawl a whim in its place. You do a lot of things like this." <sup>14-15</sup>Jesus called the crowd together again and said, "Listen now, all of you— take this to heart. It's not what you swallow that pollutes your life; it's what you vomit—that's the real pollution." <sup>17</sup>When he was back home after being with the crowd, his disciples said, "We don't get it. Put it in plain language." <sup>18-19</sup>Jesus said, "Are you being willfully stupid? Don't you see that what you swallow can't contaminate you? It doesn't enter your heart but your stomach, works its way through the intestines, and is finally flushed." (That took care of dietary quibbling; Jesus was saying that all foods are fit to eat.) <sup>20-23</sup>He went on: "It's what comes out of a person that pollutes: obscenities, lusts, thefts, murders, adulteries, greed, depravity, deceptive dealings, carousing, mean looks, slander, arrogance, foolishness—all these are vomit from the heart. There is the source of your pollution."

### *The Uptown Diner*

I am continually amazed that Jesus in the Gospels is able to weave profound and challenging truth from common experiences using everyday language. That's it; table talk, marketplace chatter, or a conversation between friends. This is certainly true of today's reading, which begins with a comment about washing up before dinner. Despite this amazing

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ability, however, I'm not sure I totally agree with Jesus this time. "It's not what you swallow that pollutes your life;" he says, "It's what you vomit—that's the real pollution." Clearly Jesus hasn't read Michael Pollan's *In Defense of Food*, or David Kessler's *The End of Overeating*. Jesus hadn't contended with a fast food nation with its endless supply of processed foods, high fructose corn syrup, and salt piled on fat piled on sugar. It's not what you swallow that pollutes? I'm not so sure.

It's also clear that Jesus has never eaten at the Uptown Diner in Jasper, Alabama. Have you? Anyone? Probably not; in fact, you probably don't know where to find Jasper on a map. That's Okay; I can tell you about it, because I've been to Jasper, and I've eaten at the Uptown. I don't know why they named it the Uptown Diner because in Jasper the difference between uptown and downtown is about a block and a half. When I was in college I often visited friends in Jasper, and late at night we would eat at the Uptown because it was the only diner still open.

We always had a good time at the Uptown; it was a unique dining experience. It was owned and operated by a retired Merchant Marine who had sailed the seven seas and brought home stories galore, exotic tastes, and spicy language. This guy was a character. He always had a joke or a witty retort, and he made it a point to inform you that you could order anything on his menu at any time of the day. You want potatoes instead of grits? No problem. You want fries instead of rice? No problem. You could order anything on his menu, to be sure, but what he brought you was anybody's guess. It might be the cheeseburger you ordered, or it might be three eggs over easy; it was his call, and it depended completely on his mood. You can imagine how this pleased a bunch of college aged boys! Yes sir, there was always a good time to be had at the Uptown, until you bit into the food... yuck! The guy couldn't cook; the food was horrible.

I hope you'll forgive me if I question Jesus' assertion defending the purity of food ...or perhaps Jesus is talking about something other than food. I would like to explore this possibility after we spend a bit of time in prayer. Will you join me?

Gracious One, in our time together we pray that you will open our minds, our hearts, our spirits to see the world as you see it; to know your presence as you intended; to understand and live faith on the model of Jesus of Nazareth. Teach us, make us avid pupils that we may live and grow as we walk in faith. In the name of the Christ we pray. Amen.

### *The Pharisees Have a Point*

It seems that the bone of contention between Jesus and the Pharisees in this passage has to do with washing up before dinner. You wouldn't think that would be such a problem, especially if you were raised in the Deep South as I was. Shoot; Mama wouldn't let us come to the table till we'd washed our hands and put on a shirt. To be fair, the Pharisees were involved in something a bit more complex than washing up before dinner. They were purifying themselves ritually, cleansing themselves, honoring the presence of God through the sacred ritual of hand washing. Their beef with Jesus' disciples is that they seem to be all about fun and frivolity; having such a good time and so anxious to eat that they can't be bothered to wash up.

The Pharisees have a point, you know. Water has always been regarded as a sacred, cleansing agent; a symbol of God's impact on our lives. I'm sure you remember the words of the psalmist, "Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow..." Or, again, Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman in which he offers her a stream of living water that will gush forth to newness of life. Water symbolizes cleansing, water purifies, water heals. We are still immersed fully in the stream at baptism to symbolize dying to sin and rising to new life; and to symbolize the cleansing of our sin.

The Pharisees have a valid point about the power of water as a symbol of spiritual cleansing. And I dare say Jesus wouldn't argue with them on that point. He would argue, however, that they hadn't allowed that cleansing to penetrate their hearts. He would argue that their faith was superficial and exterior; that theirs was a faith from the outside in.

### *Outside In or Inside Out?*

Faith from the outside in; what could this mean? You could say this is a faith more concerned with protecting itself from the world - protecting itself from the pollution, soil, and degradation with which the world constantly barrages our spirits - than with allowing God to cleanse and renew the heart. It is a big, bad world out there; a world full of anger and hatred, pain and suffering, bitterness and greed. It is a big, bad world out there, and the Pharisees

exemplify the temptation to protect the spirit from its pollution and spiritual erosion. There is a faith from the outside in.

Faith from the outside in is clearly a faith based on fear. See how they scour the pots and pans; see how they scrub their hands; protecting, always protecting themselves from dirt and pollution. But faith as Jesus sees it is not meant as a protection from the world. Faith is a source of courage and compassion that thrusts us into that very world to walk in faith without fear, and to serve and share the life of faith with others.

Faith from the outside in, again, is a selfish faith; concerned with *me* and *me* alone. It is intended to protect *me*, to insulate *me*, to insure *my* safety and prosperity. Others can fend for themselves. This would likely be the Pharisees' attitude toward Jesus' disciples. They are not so much interested in their well being as they are interested in making themselves look good at their expense. Faith for them is selfish.

Jesus makes short work in this passage of turning this model of faith on its head. In so many words he responds that faith is not to be lived from the outside in, but rather from the inside out. Faith begins with the heart – melting, molding, and transforming it into something new – and flows outward from this headwater. The image of living water Jesus uses with the Samaritan woman is appropriate here. It is a fountain that gushes forth to purify and cleanse, a fountain of living water teeming with courage, compassion, and joy.

This fountain – this faith - is sure to overflow the banks of the heart. Its current is sure to wash us into the world to live and walk in faith. Faith is not based on fear; rather, faith overcomes fear and results in bold confidence. Faith doesn't protect the heart from the big, bad world; faith fortifies the heart that it thrusts into a world in need.

This fountain – this faith – is sure to overflow the banks of the heart; it is sure to spill over into the lives of others. The movement of faith is from one to another; from one to many; from the heart of God to the heart of the world. There is too much life in the fountain of faith to be dammed up and hoarded by one alone. Thus, faith is never selfish; faith is never about me and God; period, end of story. Faith doesn't insulate us from others, but washes us up on the shore of their lives to share compassion, joy, and peace.

Jesus makes short work of turning the Pharisees' model of faith on its head. Faith is not about sacred rituals, he implies, but about sacred relationships. Faith is all about letting the fountain overflow; faith is all about shaping that fountain into acts of compassion, words of gentleness, reconciliation with others, and into caring for, sharing with, and supporting others.

### *Jesus Gets It*

Lest we regard the Pharisees too sternly, we should note that we, too, often fall into their model of faith. In fact, truer words were never spoken than those of Jesus' disciples who confessed, "We don't get it." Many times we don't get it; many times we want to protect our own and withdraw from the world in fear. Fear never allows the fountain of faith to overflow its banks; fear pushes others away, leaving them to tend to their own lives as we tend to ours.

Jesus gets it; Jesus understands that our lives are intimately intertwined with others, and that faith is the connection between them. We need each other, and God depends on us to care for each other. The bounties that were mentioned in our prayer earlier today, the generous bounties of the earth that God provides for us are meant to be shared. They are the instruments of faith, and God counts on us to care for others within this community that we call humankind. God counts on those who walk in faith to be there for others; to care for those Jesus called the least of these. To care for the ones that the prophets always stood for when no one else did, those on the fringe of society, those who were poor and ill and diseased, those who didn't have a real place to stand in society. God depends on us to let the fountain of faith flow outward from our hearts into the lives of these little ones.

Why? You may ask. Why are we called on to care for each other, why do we provide for the needs of others? You might be surprised by the answer given by Jesus' life and example. Firstly, because everything we have to share - from the joy in our hearts to the wealth in our bank accounts - is a gift from God. Everything we have is a gift, it belongs to God, and God's intent has always been to share, to give away, to let it overflow; let it flood, let it spill over into the lives of others. Secondly, it follows that we care for others - we tend to the needs of the least of these - because we can. Think about this. We are blessed with resources beyond

imagining. We know unprecedented bounty in our lives. And we are urged by God to share this bounty – the tools of faith – with others ...simply because we can.

Faith from the inside out; this is the model of faith Jesus commends to us today. A life that flows from the inside out, from the presence of God deep in our hearts outward into the lives of others. Never timid or reserved, never attempting to protect ourselves against the world, never fearful of what may lie ahead, we are called to shape the fountain of faith into acts of compassion, words of peace, and lives of shared bounty. Nevertheless, I encourage you to wash your hands before lunch. Amen.