

Sermon Manuscript – Our Savior Lutheran Church - Westminster, MA

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September 1, 2024

Mark 7:14-23

Imagine yourself walking through a dense forest, the air fresh with the scent of pine and earth. As you tread deeper into the woods, you come upon a stream. Its waters are crystal clear, flowing gently over smooth stones. You kneel, cupping your hands to take a drink, and you can see the pebbles at the bottom, each one distinct and unmarred. The purity of the water is striking, refreshing, and life-giving.

Suddenly, a drop of oil fell into that stream. You watch as the drop disperses, spreading a thin, iridescent film across the surface. The once-clear water is now tainted, the purity lost. It doesn't matter how small the impurity is, it defiles the whole stream.

This is the image that Jesus presents to us in today's Gospel reading from Mark 7:14-23, where He shifts the focus from external rituals to the condition of your heart. He speaks of a purity that is not about what you see on the outside but about what lies within. It's a purity that cannot be maintained by human effort alone but requires a transformation only God can provide.

Jesus begins by calling out to the crowd, saying, "Hear me, all of you, and understand: There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him." (Mark 7:14-15). To you, who are familiar with the teachings of the Law, this statement might seem perplexing, even scandalous. After all, the Law of Moses, which you hold dear, is filled with commands regarding clean and unclean foods, rituals, and ceremonies designed to keep God's people pure.

Think back to the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 4:1-2, where he instructs the Israelites to "listen to the statutes and the rules" that God has given, to "keep them, that you may live." These laws were not mere guidelines; they were divine commands, meant to set you apart as holy, as God's chosen people. The Law was serious business, not something to be taken lightly or ignored.

But as you examine these laws, consider what Jesus is pointing out. The Pharisees and scribes had become so focused on the external observance of the Law that they missed the true intent behind it. They believed that by adhering strictly to these outward rituals, they could maintain purity and righteousness

before God. Yet Jesus tells you that the real source of defilement is not what enters from the outside, but what comes from within, from the heart.

The Law demands more than just external obedience. It demands a pure heart. This is where the Law shows its full power, as it reveals the sin that lies deep within you. You might be able to avoid unclean foods, perform the right rituals, and present yourself as outwardly pure, but the Law cuts through all of that. It lays bare the truth that your heart is not as pure as you would like to believe.

However, the Law, while it reveals your sin, offers no solution. It cannot purify your heart. It can only show you how impure you truly are. This is why you must turn to the Gospel, the Good News of what God has done for you in Christ.

In Mark 7:21-23, Jesus lists the sins that flow from the heart: "For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person." This is a sobering list, and it leaves no room for self-justification. You might be tempted to think that you are free from such sins, but when you examine your heart honestly, you know that these sins reside there, even if they are not always visible.

But here is where the Gospel brings hope. Remember the promise God made through the prophet Ezekiel: "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses ... And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you" (Ezekiel 36:25-26). This promise is fulfilled in Christ. Through His death and resurrection, He has made atonement for your sins, and He offers you a new heart—a heart that is cleansed by His blood, a heart that desires to do His will.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul speaks of the spiritual armor that you must put on as a believer. He writes, "Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth ... and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace" (Ephesians 6:14-15). The readiness, this Gospel of Peace, does not come from your own efforts but is a gift from Christ. He is the one who equips you, who purifies your heart, and who gives you the strength to stand firm against the temptations and attacks of the evil one.

As a Christian, you live in the tension between the Law and the Gospel. The Law shows you your sin and the depths of your impurity. The Gospel, on the other hand, shows you your Savior, who purifies you from all sin. The Law tells you what you should be, while the Gospel tells you who Christ has made you to be.

In Deuteronomy 4:6-9, Moses urges the people to "keep and do" the commandments, for this will be their wisdom and understanding in the sight of the nations. But he also exhorts them to "take care, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life." This is a call to remembrance, a call to remember not only the Law but also the mighty works of God, especially His work of salvation.

For you, this means remembering your baptism, where you were washed clean, given a new heart and brought into the family of God. It means remembering the Word, where you hear both the Law that convicts you and the Gospel that comforts you. And it means remembering the Lord's Supper, where you receive the body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.

Returning to the image of the stream, you can see that no matter how pure the water was originally, it cannot cleanse itself once it is tainted. But Christ, the Living Water, has the power to cleanse you. He removes the stain of sin from your heart, purifying you from within.

So, do not focus merely on outward appearances, on external rituals that give the illusion of righteousness. Instead, look to Christ, who alone can give you a pure heart. Heed the words of Paul in Ephesians 6:18, praying "at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication." For in prayer, in the Word, and in the Sacraments, you are continually reminded of the Gospel promise, namely that in Christ, your heart is made pure, and you are made whole.

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus. Amen!