## Sermon written and presented by Pastor Robin Ferree, serving St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Jerome Parish, Edinburg, VA. for the 14th Sunday after Pentecost, Year B

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

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

‘This people honors me with their lips,  
but their hearts are far from me;  
in vain do they worship me,  
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.” For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

The Gospel of the Lord.

**THE HEART OF THE MATTER**

LITURGY SERMON SERIES #11

Pentecost 14B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Jerome Parish

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**14**Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: **15**there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.” (Other ancient authorities add verse 16, *“Let anyone with ears to hear listen”)*

**21**For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, **22**adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. **23**All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.” Mark 7:14-15, 21-23

The Gospel of the Lord?!

Yech! I don't want to preach anymore if the only things coming from my heart are evil intentions! ...if the only things coming from my heart involve fornication, theft, murder, adultery, extreme greed, wickedness, deceit, uncontrollable lust, envy, slander, pride and folly! What a horrible Gospel lesson... ...if that list is all there is. We'd all be a defiled, condemned people left to suffer in eternal hell. These few verses give me a whole new understanding of what I say in the confession. "I confess that I am in bondage to sin and cannot free myself!" I sure can't save myself if evil is all that comes out of my heart when it is left in my hands alone.

Thanks be to God my heart is not left in my hands alone! And your heart is not left in your hands alone! Thanks be to God that we have the Word, we have Jesus Christ who died for our sins and writes God's Word on our hearts from without. And thanks to God's grace and mercy we are able to remember those words, and learn them by heart. God can and does write them on our hearts, overwriting the sinful nature afflicting all of us.

When I was in high school I often babysat, or boy-sat, as my charges said, two youth from our congregation. We had great fun together and eventually, as they grew, became friends. One day when I was in my mid 20's my mom called. She was nearly hysterical, barely choking out the words, "Gary is dead!" I knew immediately who she meant and waited silently, breathlessly for her to be able to go on. Finally she told me that Gary, who by then was about 16, was on the tractor mowing hay on their family farm. The tractor flipped over, pinning Gary beneath. His father tried with all his might to lift the tractor off Gary's chest. He could not. Eventually Glenn knelt beside his son, took his hand, and did the only thing he could think of. Looking at his dying son, Glenn prayed the Lord's Prayer. Gary mouthed the words with him, unable to speak. At Gary's funeral, his dad said, "I didn't know what else to do so I prayed my son into Jesus' arms. I prayed the only prayer I knew by heart. I had no other words." In what had to be one of the worst nightmares of his life. Glenn, with all his heart, prayed the prayer our Lord gave us because he knew it by heart. It was all he had left to give his son - and oh what a gift - "deliver us from evil." Gary was delivered.

In the midst of overwhelming tragedy, God gave my friends all the words they needed as they joined in prayer one last time. He gave them a tomorrow filled with the assurance of the resurrection to life everlasting in the midst of a day filled with death.

"I prayed the only prayer I knew by heart..."

It's a good thing we Lutherans use the same liturgy week after week. It's a good thing we pray the Lord's Prayer during almost every worship. It's a good thing we come to know these words by heart, that these words become engraved on our hearts. They become the lifeblood which pulses through our very hearts, and give us grace and the ability to do good. Even our little ones know at least part of these words by age 3 if they've been in worship regularly. When we say something like, "Let us pray together the words our Savior gave us," we all know, without a doubt what prayer we're about to pray. These words of the Lord's Prayer enter our hearts - beginning at our Baptisms, continuing in our weekly worship, punctuating our First Communions and Confirmations, and sending us into eternal life. We know them by heart... from our hearts... in the center of our very being.

The Lord's Prayer stands at the center of everything Christians have said and done about prayer throughout all of history. It gives form to our conversations with God, and models our individual lives of prayer. The words simply become part of us, living within us, sustaining us when all else fails.

Prayer has many expressions, depending on our relationship with God. Prayer follows the pattern of other conversations. Sometimes we speak boldly with great understanding and clarity. At other times we express great frustration and anguish. Sometimes we mumble timidly, with hesitation, because of uncertainty or anxiety. At other times words just don't convey the depth of emotion we feel. All of these kinds of conversation point us continually to our need to pray without ceasing, especially the prayers we know by heart.

While prayer is essential for our individual relationship with God, it also forms the foundation for who we are, and whose we are, as the church. We learn to pray. The disciples came to Jesus and asked him to teach them to pray. As a community of followers, Jesus taught them the prayer filled with the tradition and heritage of the community of faith and involved the whole person. As such it is our prayer as well.

Prayer as a conversation, a sharing, involves all who listen and speak. Prayer requires our hearts. In prayer, we open ourselves to the ways God can move us, and we voice our concerns to the God who already knows - yet wants to hear. We pray to God as a loving caregiver whose grace toward us is abundant beyond measure.

Prayer is both risk and promise. Every time we open ourselves to another we take a risk. In prayer we take the ultimate risk as we trust God to enter the most intimate places in our hearts and surrender to God's will for each of us. "THY kingdom come. THY WILL be done..." The ultimate risk... The ultimate promise... We take this risk and receive this promise because to us belongs the sure and certain hope of the resurrection. We do not receive the promise of a specific answer. Instead we receive the promise of the best answer from God who knows our every need, from our God, who knows us by heart. "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen." So be it. Nothing more certain can be said. No greater hope found...