

“Evil Intentions”

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Song of Solomon 2:8-13

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

When I was growing up, we had a sign hanging over the sink in our bathroom that said, “Cleanliness is next to Godliness.” Did anyone ever tell you that? It’s a well-known saying, at least for people of my generation, but no one knows where it comes from. Some people say it’s from the middle ages in Europe during the plague. It supposedly meant that next to honoring God, the most important thing is to be clean, because that would help prevent the spread of disease. But in my family it was used to remind children (and adults) to clean up after ourselves, and especially to wash our hands. I bet my grandmother believed it was God’s holy word, directly from the Bible. It’s not. Still, when we were in Guatemala last summer, we made up skits to teach the children how to wash their hands with soap and how that helps to keep you healthy. It’s a good practice to wash your hands, and to wash food that’s been handled by others before eating. But is cleanliness second only to godliness?

In the story we read from Mark this morning, the disciples had just come back from a mission. Jesus had sent them out two by two throughout the surrounding villages to prepare people for the Kingdom of God, and to bring relief to the sick and suffering. Then, when they gathered back together, Jesus fed thousands of people in the wilderness with just a few fish and loaves of bread. Then he walked on water, and was swarmed by people looking for healing. Jesus and his disciples were throwing themselves, heart, mind, soul and body, into godly work. But in today’s reading it says the scribes and Pharisees traveled all the way from Jerusalem for what? They questioned and criticized Jesus about what? He was not enforcing a rule for his disciples to wash their hands? What was that about?

The original law about washing hands was for the high priest only. Exodus 30 (17-21) said that the priest Aaron should wash his hands and feet before going into the temple to minister. Over the years it became the custom for the Pharisees to apply the laws for priests to everyone who was serious about their faith. Washing hands was not just about dirt and germs. It was a way to take something common, such as eating, and make it holy. In that sense, it would be like saying grace before meals as many of us do. In the midst of a daily activity, we stop to be thankful and mindful of the gift of food and our dependence on God. And if you are a Christian, but you never say grace, someone might question whether you are serious about your faith. So when the Pharisees and scribes asked Jesus, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled (or common) hands?” it might be like someone asking me, “Why don’t all your church members say grace before meals? Or go to Bible study every week? Or tithe ten percent of their money?” In many churches, that is the tradition.

Jesus didn’t argue with the Pharisees over whether or not his disciples should wash their hands. Jesus had no problem with religious practices. Jesus himself was an observant Jew. He would never deny that religious practice can help to shape our hearts. For example, going to church, taking time to pray during the week, reading the Bible, all these things help to strengthen our connection to God and shape who we are. But you

can do all these things and still keep your heart far from God. And that's what Jesus was concerned about, the state of our hearts. So he quoted the prophet Isaiah (29:13) to the Pharisees,

"This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me," (they say the right words, but their hearts are not in it). And he said, "... in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines," (Their worship isn't really worship. They are just worshipping their own human traditions.) People can make up all sorts of religious traditions to get their hearts in the right place and help them do the right thing. But if we don't want to let God change and shape our hearts, and if we have no real interest in doing the right thing, but are just going through the motions, what good is that?

The real problem was that some of those scribes and Pharisees had evil intentions. Back in chapter 3 (v.6) of Mark, the Pharisees had made a pact with the people loyal to Herod. They had agreed together to do what they could to destroy Jesus. And now they were hiding these evil intentions with what looked like a concern for good actions. If you are planning to kill someone, what you eat and how you eat it is totally irrelevant. You don't need to change your diet. You need to change your heart.

So Jesus said, "It's not what goes into a person that defiles or corrupts. It's what comes out." If you have given yourself over to evil, you are corrupt no matter how well you behave on the outside. But if in your heart you are trying to live in harmony with God, and do what is right and good, it doesn't matter what form your religious practice takes. God will honor what you have to offer.

Now the passage from Mark lists a few examples of evil intentions. Some of the are sexual: licentiousness which means lustful disregard of rules, laws or morality, fornication, or any kind of sex outside of marriage, or with no sense of responsibility or commitment to the other, and of course adultery, which is violating your or someone else's marriage vows. But it's not just about sex. Mark also lists theft, murder, wickedness, slander and folly or foolishness. He lists avarice or greed, deceit or tricking others, envy or resenting someone else's good fortune, and pride. Now, I know I've told you before it can be good to be proud. But there are different kinds of pride, and Mark is talking about the bad kind of pride, where you feel superior to others, or more important than you really are. All these things come from within us, and can lead to evil. I'm sure we could all come up with more evil intentions if we thought about it for another minute. Now Jesus never said that people are *totally* depraved. We were all created in God's image and we all have some good in us. But we also have mixed up desires and a lot goes on under the surface that we are not always aware of.

When I was in college, over 40 years ago, I worked in a summer camp for disturbed children. And one of my campers was a little boy with elective mutism. That means he knew how to talk, but he wouldn't say a word. He just smiled a fake smile and nodded his head in agreement with almost everything. If he didn't agree, his face would cloud over, but he would keep smiling and nodding his head. Four or five weeks into camp he started to speak. And we all rejoiced to hear the first few words out of his mouth! But then more words came and we were shocked to hear all sorts of curses coming out of this 8 year old boy. On the outside, he looked like a sweet little kid. But inside was a hurt and angry little boy who was so afraid of the feelings churning inside that he couldn't open his mouth. Once he started to let it out, we were shocked and

amazed. But we had a better idea of what we were dealing with and how we might help him.

What if you have anger or selfishness you can't let go of, or you are lusting after the wrong things, or you are full of envy, deceit, pride or folly? We all have some part of us that is what the Pharisees would call "unclean," part of us that wants to distort the truth, that wants to ignore our best selves and hide from God. We can't get rid of it by washing our hands. But we can be open about it. We can confess to God and to someone we trust, what is in our hearts. And with grace and forgiveness, God can work in our hearts to purify them.

No one can just decide not to feel angry. But we can pray that God would strengthen our love. No one can just decide not to feel selfish. But we can pray that God would send us someone or something besides ourselves to care about. No one can just decide not to lust after people or things they shouldn't have. But we can ask God to help us pay attention to and appreciate what we do have. That's when religious practice can help us, when it helps to keep us from acting on evil intentions, and focus on gratitude, generosity and love, drawing us closer to God. When we bring our hearts to the light of Christ, he will never reject us. Paul tells us that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:35-39). And nothing will disqualify us from God's grace, if we open our hearts and bring them into the light of Christ.

We have many traditions and practices here in this church, from our volunteer efforts, to our choir, Sunday School and the form of worship we use. We receive an offering and have a pledge drive each fall, an all-church retreat, and many other yearly events. Some of our traditions last a few years and then we drop them. Others have been with us for as long as anyone can remember. It's not that everyone has to do everything. We do what is helpful to us, or what challenges us. What are important are not the traditions in and of themselves, but how they help us deal with evil intentions and turn our hearts to God to increase our sense of gratitude, generosity and love, and help us reach out to the world with the message of God's love. That's what it's all about.

So may we throw ourselves, heart, soul, mind and body, into the work of God. And may all we do draw us closer to our true selves, and closer to God. In Jesus' name. Amen.