Sunday, September 1, 1991
INSIDE OUT (No. 1 in a Series: Living from the Inside Out)
Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

Religious traditions and practices — what we do on the outside with our bodies — can be very important in our lives. For example, folding our hands together and closing our eyes when we are in a time of prayer can aid us in our concentration, helping us to avoid distractions. Some prefer to kneel when they are praying because it is a position of humility and vulnerability. The early Congregationalists in New England in the 1600s had a tradition of standing with arms raised and eyes open while praying, symbolizing a position of openness to God and God's will in their lives. Deep down, we all know that whatever physical position we assume for prayer on the outside is not as crucial as what is going on inside our minds and hearts. We can appear very pious on the outside, go through all the proper motions, and yet be quite the opposite on the inside. Furthermore, we know that God is not paying attention to our outside piety but rather to our inside sincerity, our attitude. Are we self-righteous? Are we humble? Are we thankful? Are we forgiving of others? Are we open to hearing God's will for us?

Yet there have always been those among us who seem to emphasize the outside more than the inside. They can be quick to criticize any deviation from proper religious tradition or practice. It has been said that such people have a blindness to the big, with a keen eye for the little.

One day, some of the very religious leaders in Jesus' time noticed that his disciples did not properly wash their hands before eating. Over the years, the Hebrew people had developed some rather elaborate religious rituals to help remind them of God's goodness, and this ceremonial handwashing before and after eating was one of them. The purpose was not cleanliness but consecration. It was to remind them that every meal was an occasion both for thanksgiving — since food was the gift of God — and for religious fellowship. It was a good and helpful ceremony. But like many religious practices, it could become a mere form, a rigid regulation enforced by appeal to the authority of "the tradition of the elders." It was one of those relatively new scribal-Pharisaic regulations that worked hardship upon the ordinary rank and file of working people, who had little leisure time for the observance of the detailed rule of life laid down by the scribes and observed by them and the Pharisees. In every day and age, one way to show your power over others is to set up a whole list of rules and then do your best to make all people obey them to the letter. These religious leaders judged people from the outside. Were they following all rules and regulations exactly as they had been laid down by them? This judging of people by what they do on the outside has come down through the years and is still with us, especially in the field of religion, although other areas of life are not immune, as we shall see.

Jesus, on the other hand, emphasized that we are to live from the inside out. A few years ago, a couple with two children said they wanted to join this church and that their two teenage daughters also wanted to become members at the same time. However, the mother had a question that had been bothering her for years. She said that her one daughter had not been baptized in a formal way but, from the mother's point of view, had been baptized. I asked her to explain. She said that when this daughter was a baby, only a few weeks old, she was very weak, often ill, and the mother wondered at times if the child would survive. One night, the child was very ill, and all had been done that could be done for her. Her mother sat with her in the rocking chair and comforted her as best she could. Tears flowed freely from the mother's eyes as she worried about whether the child would still be alive in the morning. That night, the

mother said, “I baptized my daughter with my tears.” I assured her that the child was indeed baptized and in a deeper way than any of us could understand. What do you think?

Not long ago, I came across another incident involving the outside form of baptism versus the inside meaning. The elders of a congregation, which believes that only baptism by immersion is valid, discovered some awkward information about their minister’s wife. She was a devout and Christ-centered person, but she had entered that denomination through the back door by joining a congregation that simply allowed her to transfer her membership, even though her baptism was by sprinkling as a baby. This particular congregation, of which her husband was now the minister, was not that open-minded. They had always required “believer’s baptism” by immersion, even of those individuals who joined their church and who had been previously baptized by sprinkling as a baby. The minister’s wife had been a member of their congregation now for three years, and they had only recently found out that she had not been immersed. What are they going to do? What would Jesus say with his emphasis on living from the inside out?

Another example: Last spring, two young people came to talk with me about their upcoming wedding in this church. As always, I asked them about their own religious background. The groom said that he had grown up in another denomination, but he, along with his parents and older sister, had left that other denomination some years ago. I asked him to explain further. He said that his parents had gotten into a conflict with the minister over this issue of confirmation and Holy Communion. His older sister had not matured mentally because of a childhood illness with a very high fever, which had caused permanent brain damage. So she was mentally unable to participate in the confirmation program as a young person, and according to the church’s rules, she could not take Communion even as an adult because she had not been confirmed, although she wanted to take Communion very much and could not understand why she was prohibited. What do you think?

I assured the young man that in this congregation, his sister — no matter what her mental age or condition, whether she had gone through confirmation or not — would be welcome at the Lord’s Table at all times. Since then, she and her parents have joined this church, and she has participated in Communion a number of times. Outward forms and rules can sometimes blind us to the inward spirit. Isn’t that what Jesus was saying over and over again?

Jesus always looked past the outside appearance of a person to the inside. He wanted to know the inner person. He said to the religious critics of his time, “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.” It is also from the heart, the inner person, that good intentions come. It is the inward person that needs to be changed.

This is a message that needs to be heard especially in our time, not only in our religious life but in the larger world as well, where there is so much emphasis on “image” or “personality” rather than character and principles, which form the inner person.

A scholar who has studied the past 200 years of writing about success says that he discovered a startling pattern in this literature. More and more of the success literature of the past 50 years is superficial. It is filled with social image consciousness, techniques, and quick fixes. In stark contrast, almost all the literature in the first 150 years focused on what could be called the “character ethic” as the foundation of success — things like integrity, humility, fidelity, temperance, courage, justice, patience, and simplicity. The first 150 years is the story of efforts to integrate certain principles and habits deep within our nature. But he claims that shortly after

World War II, the basic view of success shifted from the “character ethic” to what we might call the “personality ethic.” Success became more a function of personality, of public image, of skills and techniques.

Recently, I read a new book about the spectacular rise and fall of Donald Trump. According to the author, Trump valued publicity and image more than sound finance, and because of publicity and image, he created many banks and other institutions. Some of the personality and public image approaches of the past few years have been clearly manipulative, even deceptive, encouraging people to use techniques to get other people to like them, or to fake interest in the hobbies of others to get out of them what they wanted, or to use the “power look,” or wear the “power necktie,” or manage the “power lunch.” Books were written on how to intimidate your way through life. The emphasis has been on quick-fix influence techniques, power strategies, communication skills, and outward positive attitudes.

This is not to say that some elements of the personality ethic, personality growth, and communication skill training are not beneficial. They can be very helpful. But they are secondary, not primary traits. If I try to use human influence strategies and tactics to get other people to do what I want, to work better, to be more motivated, to like me and each other, while my character is fundamentally flawed, marked by duplicity and insincerity, then in the long run, I have failed. My duplicity will breed distrust, and everything I do — even using so-called good human relations techniques — will be perceived as manipulative. Basic inner goodness is needed.

The Psalmist wrote, “Search your own heart with all diligence, for out of it flow the issues of life.” Life is to be lived from the inside out. It is character that communicates most eloquently. As Emerson said, “What you are shouts so loudly in my ears I cannot hear what you say.” That’s what Jesus was talking about. It’s no wonder that many people in our time have outside success but an inner hunger. They are empty inside. They have not paid enough attention to their inner life — their spiritual life, their basic character.

Jesus knew that there are some basic principles that govern human growth and interaction — principles woven into the fabric of every civilized society throughout history and that make up the roots of every family and institution that has endured and prospered. They are, in the deepest sense, given to us by God. These principles are a part of every major enduring religion. We build human character on the inside when we make these principles a part of our everyday life. Here’s a partial list — the principle of fairness, out of which our whole concept of equity and justice is developed. Other basic principles would include integrity and honesty. Another is human dignity and worth. Another is service, or the idea of making a contribution for the good of society. Another is mercy. “What does God require of you but to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). Another principle is quality or excellence. There is also the principle of potential, the idea that we can grow, develop, and release more and more potential. Life is not static.

What are some others that you would add to the list? It is a good topic for a family discussion. Principles are guidelines for human conduct that are proven to have enduring, permanent value. They’re fundamental. One way to understand the self-evident nature of these basic principles is to consider the absurdity of attempting to live an effective life based on their opposites. Would you want to live in a society or community where unfairness, deceit, dishonesty, uselessness, mediocrity, and degeneration were the basic principles on which that society was built?

I believe God is the source of the correct basic principles that are the foundation of our life together. With God's help, these principles can become the center of our inner life, and when that happens, all of life takes on new meaning and joy. When we begin to align ourselves with correct principles, God's power is released within our nature, and we begin to fulfill the measure of our creation. Remember, as de Chardin wrote, "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience." Amen.