Sunday, August 31, 1997
LIVING FROM THE INSIDE OUT
Mark 7:1-9,14-15,21-23

In the movie The Godfather, there's a scene near the end that I've never forgotten. The Corleone family, a powerful Mafia group that makes deals you can't refuse, is shown attending a church service. It's a service of baptism and Holy Communion, and it's all very religious and liturgical. While the family is shown involved in these church rituals, we are intermittently shown scenes of the family's "hit-men" shooting and strangling people to death.

The whole scene is meant to reveal the hypocrisy of this religious family. They perform the outward signs of faith, but inwardly they are unclean and corrupted. The contradiction between what is said and claimed, between what is affirmed in faith and what is practiced in daily life, is enormous.

This is not to deny that religious traditions, practices, liturgies, and rituals — what you do on the outside with your bodies — can be very important in your life. For example, folding your hands together and closing your eyes while you pray can aid your concentration, helping you avoid distractions. Some prefer to kneel while praying because it's 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, which symbolized openness to God and God's will in their lives.

Yet 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, and how we live our lives daily. You can appear very pious on the outside, like the Corleone family, going through all the proper motions, but be the opposite on the inside. You can be sure that God is not paying attention to your outward piety but rather to your inner sincerity and attitude. Are you self-righteous? Are you humble? Are you grateful? Are you forgiving of others? Are you open to hearing God's will for your life?

In spite of this, there have always been those among us who seem to emphasize living from the outside more than living from the inside. They are quick to criticize any deviation from proper religious tradition or practice. It has been said that such people have a blindness to the big picture but a keen eye for the little things. This isn't a new issue.

One day, some of the 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 only cleanliness but consecration. It was to remind them that every meal was an occasion for thanksgiving, since food is a gift from God, and that meals can be a time for religious fellowship. The ceremonial washing of hands could be a good and helpful ceremony.

However, like many religious practices, it could also become an empty form, a rigid regulation used to evaluate an individual's piety. Furthermore, it was one of those relatively new Pharisaic regulations that worked a hardship on the ordinary rank and file of working people who had little time to observe all the detailed religious rules.

In every day and age, one way to show power over others is to set up a long list of rules and then make people obey them to the letter. These religious authorities judged people from the outside: were they following all the rules and regulations exactly as prescribed?

This judging of people by their outward actions has come down through the years and is still with us, especially in 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.

Some years back, a couple with two children wanted to join this church, and their two teenage daughters also wanted to become members. Their mother, however, had a question that had been bothering her for years. She said that her first daughter had been baptized as an infant in a church service, but her second daughter had not been baptized formally — yet she had been baptized in an unusual manner. I asked her to explain. She said that when her second daughter was a few weeks old, she became very ill, so much so that one night she feared her daughter would die. That night, she was cradling the child in her arms in a rocking chair, and her tears flowed freely. She said, “I took some of those tears and baptized my baby.” I assured her that from my perspective, her daughter had been baptized, and I was sure that from God’s perspective, she was too.

A few months later, I came across another story involving the outside form of baptism versus its inner meaning. The elders of a congregation, which believed that only baptism by immersion was valid, discovered some awkward information about their new minister’s wife. She was a devout and Christ-centered person, but she had entered the denomination through the back door by joining a congregation that allowed her to transfer her membership, even though her baptism had been by sprinkling as a baby. The 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 for those who had been baptized by sprinkling as babies.

The minister’s wife had been a member of their congregation for three years, and only recently had they found out that she had never been baptized by immersion. What were they going to do? What would Jesus say with his emphasis on living from the inside out?

Overemphasizing outward forms and rules can sometimes blind us to the inward spirit. That’s what Jesus was talking about over and over again. He always looked past a person’s outside appearance to their inside. He wasn’t concerned with whether or not an individual was performing religious rituals exactly as the authorities prescribed.

He said to the religious critics of his day, “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 within 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 on inner character and principles.

A scholar who studied the past 200 years of writings about success discovered a startling pattern. His conclusion was that most success literature in the past 50 years is superficial. It’s filled with social image-consciousness, techniques, and quick fixes. In stark contrast, almost all the literature from 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 a story of efforts to integrate certain principles and habits deep within our nature. But shortly after World War II, the basic view of success shifted from the "character ethic" to what he calls the "personality ethic." Success became more a function of personality, public image, and skills and techniques.

We've all read about the ups and downs of Donald Trump. According to what I've read, Trump valued publicity and image more than sound financial management, and because of the image he created, many banks and financial institutions were eager to lend him money.

A few years ago, Prentice Hall Press published a book titled The Day America Told the Truth. It featured the results of surveys of the American people and was subtitled "What People Really Believe About Everything That Matters." The book aimed to give us a truthful look at what Americans are really all about.

In one survey, people were asked what they would change about themselves and how they might fulfill their potential as human beings. I expected the most common answers would be things like, "I'd be a better person," "I'd try to do more for others," or "I'd try to make a difference in the world." But none of these answers were given.

The authors were shocked. "Better person" didn't even make the rankings. People across the country showed much less interest in changing their inner selves than in changing their outward appearances: weight, body, hair, face, and age. The top two answers were, "I want to be rich," and "I want to be thin."

When I read the results of these surveys, I wasn't surprised. Many of the personality and public image emphases of recent years have encouraged people to focus on their outside more than their inside. They've stressed using techniques to get others to like them, faking interest in others' hobbies to get what they want, or using the "power look," the "power necktie," or arranging the "power lunch." Books have been written on how to intimidate your way through life. The emphasis has been on quick-fix influence techniques and power strategies.

This isn't to say that some elements of the personality ethic — personality growth and communication skills — aren't helpful. They can be very beneficial. But they are secondary, not primary traits. If I use human influence strategies and tactics to get others to do what I want, to work better, to be more motivated, or to like me while my character is fundamentally flawed, marked by duplicity and insincerity, then in the long run I've 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 necessary. The Psalmist wrote, "Search your own heart with all diligence, for out of it flow the issues of life." Life is best lived from the inside out. It is character that communicates most eloquently. Emerson said, "What you are shouts so loudly in my ears that I cannot hear what you say."

It's no surprise that many people in our time have outward success but inner hunger. They are empty inside. They haven't paid enough attention to their inner life — their spiritual life, their basic character.

Jesus knew and taught that some basic principles govern human growth and interaction — principles woven into the fabric of every civilized society throughout history and which form the foundation of every family and institution that has endured and prospered. These principles, in

the deepest sense, are given to us by God. They are part of every major enduring religion. We build human character on the inside when we make these principles a part of our everyday lives.

Here's a partial list of these principles, which form the foundation of living from the inside out:

- The principle of fairness, from which our whole concept of equity and justice is developed.
- Integrity and honesty.
- Human dignity and worth.
- Service — the idea of making a contribution for the good of society.
- Mercy: "What does God require of you but to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).
- The principle of quality or excellence.
- The principle of potential — the idea that we can grow, develop, and release more and more potential. Life is not static.

What are some other principles you would add to this list? It's a good topic for family discussion. Principles are guidelines for human conduct that 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 trying 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?

I believe God is the source of the correct basic principles that form the foundation of our life together. They are gifts from God to guide us toward a peaceful life together. That's why Jesus taught that having the right inside is more important than having the right outside.

When we begin to live our lives based on these principles — from the inside out — God's power is released within our nature, and we begin to fulfill the purpose of our creation. Amen.