Sunday, September 3, 2000
OUTSIDERS OR INSIDERS?
Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

One day, some of the religious authorities noticed that the disciples of Jesus did not properly wash their hands before eating. Most of us have been taught to wash our hands before eating if possible, but this was a different kind of handwashing. The background of this particular kind of handwashing is this: over the years, the religious leaders had developed some very elaborate religious rules and rituals to help remind them of God's goodness. A type of ceremonial handwashing before and after eating was one of them. The purpose was not cleanliness as we know it today in our handwashing but consecration. It had a very high and noble purpose. It was to remind them that every meal should be an occasion for thanksgiving since food was a gift from God, and that eating together is a sign of our need for each other. It was meant to be a good and helpful ritual.

But like many religious practices, it could become an empty outward form, or worse still, a rigid regulation enforced by appeal to the authority of "the tradition of the elders." Then if you failed to observe the ritual in its exact form, you were considered to be not worthy of God's acceptance. In Jesus' time, this ritual handwashing was one of those relatively new religious regulations that worked a hardship on 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 religious leaders.

In every day and age, one way to show your power and higher status over others is to set up a list of rules and then do your best to make all people obey them to the letter. You can then rank people according to how strictly they follow the rules and regulations. It's a way of judging people from the outside. Did she make the "sign of the cross" exactly as prescribed? Did he genuflect correctly? Was she properly reverent during the time of prayer? Did she have her hands folded and her eyes closed? Did he kneel on one knee or two?

When we stop to think about it, all of us 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. You can appear very pious on the outside, go through all the proper motions, and yet be quite the opposite on the inside. Are you self-righteous when you are praying? Are you humble? Are you thankful? Are you forgiving of others? Are you holding a grudge against someone that you refuse to forget? Are you open to hearing God's word for you?

There have always been those among us who tend to emphasize the outside more than the inside. They are quick to notice and criticize any deviation from what they consider proper religious tradition or practice. This is true not only in religion but in other areas of life and work.

Years ago, my dad, when he was still alive and working, was a natural salesman. He was very successful with whatever product he was selling, although he had little if any formal training in sales. He used to smile secretly when some supervisor would travel with him and then criticize him afterward because he did not follow exactly the sales manual the company had developed. His supervisor never mentioned how successful my dad was in his selling. One time he came home from a sales meeting and told us in the family how one speaker kept talking about the techniques for "closing" a sale. My dad at first did not know what the speaker was talking about. Closing a sale was a natural ability he had, but he had never heard it described with

that terminology or by using the techniques the speaker suggested. He had never thought of it as a distinct act.

What did Jesus say to those who were critical of his disciples because they did not follow all the outside religious rules exactly? He said, “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.”

If you are a Biblical literalist, you probably have difficulty in accepting the first part of Jesus’ statement, “There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile.” Or as one translator put it, “It’s not what you swallow that pollutes your life.” If your experience has been like mine and you’ve eaten some spoiled food that caused food poisoning, I’m sure you felt defiled.

But what Jesus is talking about here is a deeper kind of spiritual problem that can come from within. Its causes do not come from not properly observing some religious ritual. To the contrary, spiritual impurity or moral defilement starts on the inside. Using the Biblical metaphor, it arises from the heart. When you suffer from this kind of heart disease, all the heart medications and even bypass surgery won’t cure it. In Biblical language, which is highly metaphoric, the heart is not simply the organ that pumps blood through the body; it’s a metaphor for a person’s innermost core or spiritual center. “Heart” is shorthand for total person, for one’s whole being or self. A pure heart is a life directed and devoted totally toward goodness and service to others. In the Beatitudes, we are told, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”

In Biblical language, the opposite of being “pure in heart” is to be “hard-hearted.” Such a person is self-centered, ignores the needs of others, and therefore is closed off to God.

So in this passage, Jesus takes issue with those whose spiritual focus is on the surface, who are concerned solely with outward actions and appearances.

In the old movie, The Godfather, there’s a scene I’ve never forgotten. The Corleone family, a powerful Mafia group that makes deals you can’t refuse, is shown attending a church service. Both baptism and holy communion are being celebrated, and it’s all very religious in outward appearances. 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 reveals 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 and what is practiced in daily life, is enormous.

It’s not a matter of “either/or,” outside practice or inside intention, but where the emphasis is placed. Jesus was critical of those whose main emphasis was on the outside and who were judgmental of others who did not do exactly as they did.

The leaders of a congregation that believes that only baptism by immersion is valid, and that God will not accept you unless that outward form is fulfilled, discovered some awkward information about their new minister’s wife. She was a devout and Christ-centered person, she was pure in heart, but she had entered the denomination with which this congregation was affiliated through the back door by joining a previous congregation where her husband had been the minister. That previous congregation had allowed her to transfer her membership

even though her baptism was by sprinkling when she was an infant. 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 of those individuals who had been previously baptized by sprinkling as infants.

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

He always looked past the outside religious acts of a person to the inside. He was not too concerned with whether or not an individual was performing the religious rituals exactly as the religious authorities prescribed. That’s why he said, “It is from within, from the inner person, that evil intentions come,” and conversely, it is also from within, from the inner person, that good intentions come.

If you focus too much on outward appearances, there is the danger that you will give too little attention to inward attitudes. You can go through the motions and lose sight of your deeper motivations. You can focus on the rules and rituals and neglect a deeper relationship with God and with others.

It’s a basic principle that relates to all of life. Earlier, I mentioned my dad and his natural ability as a salesman, and all his sales manager emphasized was following the manual to the letter, which in his case would have negated his natural ability. Again, it’s not a matter of either/or, outside or inside, but one of emphasis.

Imagine a youngster learning to play the piano. The child holds her hands just as she has been told. She has memorized the piece perfectly. She has hit all the proper notes accurately, but her heart’s not in it, only her fingers. What she’s playing is a sort of music, but nothing that will start voices singing or feet tapping.

We live in a world today where there’s too much emphasis on “image” or “personality” and not enough on the inner life and 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. His conclusion is that most of the success literature in the past 50 years is superficial. It is filled with social image-conscious techniques and quick fixes. In stark contrast, almost all of 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 he calls the personality ethic. Success became more a function of personality, of public image, of skill, and techniques.

Outside or inside? This principle of paying attention to the inside as taught by Jesus has implications for everything we do, not only our spiritual lives.

Some years ago, Timothy Gallwey wrote a best-selling book, The Inner Game of Tennis. This was followed by another book a few years later, Inner Skiing, and then another book, The Inner Game of Golf. His inner game concepts became widely used, not only in sports but in other areas of life as well.

Mr. Gallwey was not a good golfer and didn't play very often. His average score was always 95 or more. By using inner game concepts and by playing only once a week with occasional trips to the driving range and putting green, in little over a year he took 15 strokes off his average game and now sometimes even breaks 80 on 18 holes.

Because of his success in inner game concepts, Mr. Gallwey has gone on to apply what he calls the "Inner Game" approach to such diverse fields as selling, management, stress, diet, music, and the quality of work. In his book, The Inner Game of Work, Gallwey uses the metaphor of several kinds of triangles to help the reader understand his concepts. One triangle has at its three corners: performance, learning, and enjoyment. He teaches that all three need your attention. Only emphasizing performance or what you do on the outside, for example, can be terribly counterproductive.

Unfortunately, he says, many if not most workplaces function with a bottom-line, performance-driven culture and forget the other two angles of the triangle. Making or exceeding the plan becomes all that matters. People work longer and harder, more out of fear than out of passion, only to do it over again next year. There is seldom a sense of completion or fulfillment. Stress builds and productivity ultimately declines.

It is obvious to most people, Gallwey claims, that emphasizing performance only doesn't make it happen. Quite the contrary. The three sides of the work triangle are part of an interdependent system. When either learning or the enjoyment side is ignored — in other words, the inner spirit, or the heart of the matter — performance will suffer in the long run. When it does, management feels threatened and pushes even harder for performance. Learning and enjoyment diminish even further. A cycle ensues that prevents performance from ever reaching its potential.

Sound familiar? I've seen this in many a workplace and in many individuals. I've also seen this in myself. Any one of us, or any organization, can get so focused on the goal, so driven to accomplish the objective, that we fail to learn and enjoy the process along the way.

The solution is to remember that what is going on inside of us is as important as what we are doing outside. It's no surprise that many people in our time have outside success but an inner hunger. They are empty inside or have the wrong inside attitude. They have not paid enough attention to their inner life — their spiritual side, their basic character, their inner motivations, their learning, and their enjoyment.

Are you an outsider or an insider? Remember, it's not either/or, but both/and. That's true of our spiritual lives and what we do every day in our play and in our work. But in today's world, where there is so much emphasis on the outside, you and I need to pay special attention to what's going on inside. According to Jesus, it's better to live from the inside out than from the outside in, but we have to be certain that what's going inside of us is for the good and not evil. Amen.