Sunday August 31, 2003

OUTSIDE - INSIDE
Mark 7:1-9, 14-15, 21-23

One of the strongest temptations for those who claim to be religious, according to Jesus, is the tendency to emphasize outward piety while neglecting to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself.

The story from the gospel of Mark which you have just heard is one example. Here's what happened. One day some of the religious authorities noticed that the disciples of Jesus did not properly wash their hands before eating. All of you have been taught to wash your hands before eating if possible.

It's a good habit. But this was a different kind of hand-washing.

The background of Jewish religious hand-washing is this. Over the years the religious authorities had developed some very elaborate rules and rituals to help remind them of God's goodness. A type of ceremonial hand-washing before and after eating was one of them. The main purpose was not cleanliness as we know it today in our hand-washing. Rather it was a form of consecration. It had a high and noble purpose. It was to remind you that every meal should be an occasion for thanksgiving since food was a gift from God and that eating together is a sign of your need for each

other. It was intended to be a good and helpful ritual.

But like many religious practices, it could become an empty outward from, 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 hand-washing had become so regulated and exacting that it worked a hardship on the ordinary rank and file of working people who had little leisure time for the observance of the detailed rules surrounding the ritual.

When this happens, one way to show your power and higher status over others is to watch others carefully to be sure that they obey the rules to the letter. You can then rank people according to how strictly they follow the rules. It's a way of judging people from the outside. It can also be a way of excluding people you do not think deserve to experience the love of God. Did she make the "sign of the cross" exactly as prescribed? Did she genuflect correctly? Did he bring his Bible with him to church, even though he may not have opened it all week? Did she have her hands folded and her eyes closed when she prayed?

In this story from Mark's gospel, Jesus did not say that rituals are not important. They can be very

beneficial. It was and is a matter of emphasis. Your outward show of piety is not as important as what is going on inside of you. You can appear very pious on the outside, go through all the proper motions and yet be quite the opposite on the inside and in the actions that result from what is going on 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?

In another incident, Jesus told the story of two men going up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. Outwardly the Pharisee was very pious. He knew all the right words and

the proper rituals. Standing all by himself, he prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people, thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God be merciful to me, a sinner." Then Jesus added, "I tell you this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

It's so tempting to emphasize the outside more than the inside. It's so tempting to elevate religious symbolism and national symbolism. A case in point is what has been going on in the Alabama Supreme

Court. It's up to the courts to decide whether or not the monument of the Ten Commandments placed in a public building violates the first amendment of the United States Constitution. That's for lawyers, constitutional scholars and the courts to debate and decide.

What is intriguing to me is the emphasis on the importance of an outward show of piety. I've heard people say that the reason there is so much immorality in the country and that our educational system is in such a mess is because the Ten Commandments are not posted on the wall of every classroom in the country and also because teachers are not allowed to lead their classes in

prayer. Don't you wish it was that easy to solve our problems?

I wonder too what the response would be from those who want the monument of the Ten Commandments in the building if someone put a statue of the Virgin Mary there, or a statue of Mohammed, or a large Buddha, or the book of Mormon?

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 defiles.....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 could have difficulty in accepting the first part of Jesus' statement, "There's nothing outside a person that by going in can defile." Or as another translator has it, "It's not what you swallow that pollutes your life." If your experience is like mine and you've eaten some spoiled food which has given you food poisoning, I'm sure you've felt defiled. Or let's say that you are a drug user, that could defile you, or a heavy smoker or an abuser of alcohol?

However, 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 rituals or rules. On 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 by-pass surgery won't cure it.

In Biblical terms which is filled with metaphors, the heart is not simply the organ which pumps blood through the body, it's a metaphor for a person's innermost core or spiritual center. "Heart" is shorthand for the total person, for one's whole being or self. A pure heart is a life directed and devoted toward goodness and service for others. In

the Beatitudes, it is said, “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, lacking compassion, ignores the needs of others and therefore is closed off from God.

In this story, Jesus takes issue with those whose spiritual focus is on the surface, those who are primarily concerned with outward symbols and appearances.

I learned recently that the commander of one of the death camps in Nazi Germany was a very religious

person on the outside, he prayed regularly. He wept when his pet canary died. Yet he had no problem killing Jews and others every day. When I am told that some religious leader, business leader or politician prays religiously, what I want to know is the content of those prayers. Is it more like the prayer of the Pharisee that Jesus described or more like the prayer of the tax collector?

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 rituals

and being very pious, the director of the movie intersperses scenes of the family's "hit-men" shooting and torturing people to death. The scenes reveal the hypocrisy of this religious family. They perform the outward signs of religion but inwardly are unclean and corrupted.

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 appearance and the exact following of the ritual regulations and then were judgmental of others who did not do exactly as they did.

The judging of people by what they do on the

outside is still with us, both in our religious life and secular life.

Some years back, a couple with two grown children said they wanted to join this congregation. The mother came to me with 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 that her second daughter had not been baptized in a formal way, yet she had been baptized in an unusual manner. She wanted to know if that daughter's baptism was valid or did she need to be baptized in a formal ceremony in order to join this congregation.

I asked her to tell me what happened. She said that

when her second daughter was a baby only a few weeks old, she became very ill suddenly, so much so that her mother feared her baby was going to die before she could get her to the emergency room. She said, “as I was cradling my baby in my arms, I was so afraid that I began to cry and so I took some of my tears and baptized my baby.” I assured her that from my perspective and from God’s perspective, her daughter had been baptized.

Several years ago, following the tragedy of September 11, people were sometimes criticized for not displaying the American Flag. They were considered unpatriotic. I appreciate very much the symbols of our nation and I love our flag, but a

person's patriotism should not be judged by outward appearances.

Jesus always looked past the outside religious activities of a person. He wanted to know what was going on inside. He knew that it is from within, from the inner person, that evil intentions and actions originate. Conversely he also knew that it is from within, from the inner person that good intentions and actions flow.

The puzzling question is: why are human beings so tempted to give so much attention to outward acts of piety and the symbols that go with them? It seems to me that all groups of human beings have

a tendency to want to be exclusive. Human beings want to know who is inside and who is outside. I don't know why that is. Maybe it's because being a part of a group that we think is exclusive gives us a sense of security.

One way of carrying out exclusiveness is for groups to adopt "identity markers," or boundaries. Identity markers are visible practices of dress or ritual that serve to distinguish who is inside the group from those who are outside. Identity markers can include dietary rules, ritual hand-washing, how to keep the Sabbath, and other purity laws. I remember years ago when one of the identity markers of being a Roman Catholic was that they were not allowed to eat meat on Fridays. Some of

my Catholic friends were very disappointed when that rule was modified.

Identity markers are not bad in themselves unless they are misused. That's what concerned Jesus. He knew of our tendency to want to be exclusive. It is the struggle of every human being who takes faith seriously. There is a self-righteousness in me and in you that does not want to die. There is something inside me and in you that is not bothered when others are excluded. It goes even further than that. There is something inside me and in you that ***wants*** others to be excluded, that makes us feel more special when we are on the inside and someone else is not.

To put it another way, this exclusive understanding of salvation has its comforts. It allows you and me to feel righteous and part of the "in" crowd. It helps us to remain confident of our salvation and the damnation of others. For some strange reason people of all kinds do not like the idea that God might be at work in all the world, in all people and even in all religious systems.

The good news is that Jesus broke through all of these identity markers and boundaries. He saw people as being in two groups—those who have been rejected and those who believed themselves righteous. He offered mercy to the rejected and challenged the righteous to be merciful. He knew that both the rejected and the righteous

misunderstand the grace of God. The rejected assume that their sinful behavior has removed them from God's affection and desire. The righteous conclude that their goodness has earned them God's love and favor. He knew that people in both groups need to experience the grace and love of God. And so do we all. Amen.