

**Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23; Pentecost 15B; 9/2/18 Pastor Ellen Schoepf**

This past week I was reading a church blog that focuses on issues faith communities face. The author, Thom Rainer, regularly discusses things like church growth, the changing church, and the multiple challenges churches face in this age of monumental change. Anyway, the title of this posting was: ***15 Common Sacred Cows in Churches***. In it, he talked about the things that become idols in churches, those facets of church life that are given undue (and sometimes unbiblical) respect to the point they cannot be changed. Some of the sacred cows he listed were: the parlor (we might say the library or the narthex) where nothing should ever be changed and only events that have been previously approved can be held there; the order or style of worship; the building facility itself and the property on which it sits; the pews or chairs (heaven forbid that they might be moved or changed). There were plenty more and I am not going to list all of them. However, I venture to say that every congregation has its own sacred cows, things that have become idols which keep ministry from really happening.

In today's gospel passage, we are told about a sacred cow within the Jewish community at the time of Jesus' ministry. The law itself, specifically the purity codes and dietary laws the Jewish people were to follow, had

become a sacred cow, an idol. The writer of Mark's gospel tells us the Pharisees required strict obedience to these purity codes. And, in today's reading, we are told these Pharisees come and confront Jesus, asking why his disciples eat with defiled, dirty hands. Now, truthfully, the hand washing ritual probably did have some roots in maintaining cleanliness and good hygiene. However, for the Pharisees, it had become a required religious **ritual**, one that was much more important than the inner attitude of the heart. Having reduced religion to "doing the right thing" and carefully following established law and tradition, these ritual specialists seemed to find strict enforcement of purity codes more important than having one's heart in the right place. With their stringent adherence to law, they created sharp social boundaries which, in turn, became a means of **excluding** people who were considered dirty and contaminated. Their purity practices had created a group boundary which defined who is in and who is out. While the Pharisees washed and maintained clean hands, they did **not** have clean hearts. They suffered from a form of heart disease where they had lost touch with the very heart of God.

So, Jesus begins addressing the nature of people's hearts – the Pharisees, the disciples and ours. Jesus knows that, for the Pharisees, observance of ritual and tradition had become more important than

**compassion and love.** Jesus responds by quoting the prophet Isaiah.

Listen to the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases Jesus' response in *The Message*.

Jesus said, "Isaiah was right about frauds like you, hit the bull's-eye in fact:

'These people make a big show of saying the right thing,  
but their heart isn't in it.  
They act like they are worshiping me,  
but they don't mean it.  
They just use me as a cover  
For teaching whatever suits their fancy,  
Ditching God's command  
And taking up the latest fads.'

Now, I have to say that rituals **are** important in our lives and in the life of the faith community. Jesus is not telling anyone to do away with ritual and tradition. However, there needs to be a consonance or a balance in regard to ritual and a life of faith. And, I do wonder if we, at times, also suffer from some form of the same heart disease as we worship **our** sacred cows and honor certain traditions. Do we suffer from this form of heart disease when our rituals become antiseptic and hollow, when they are not vehicles of the love and grace of God? Do we suffer from this form of heart disease when we build protective walls and create social boundaries within our culture so that we can divorce ourselves from the outcasts of society, from issues of the poor, the homeless and the forgotten?

Theologian, Daniel Clendenin, in his weekly blog asks this question:

*“....What “outcasts” do I sanctimoniously spurn as impure, unclean, dirty, contaminated, and, in my mind, far from God? The mentally ill, people who have married three or four times, wealthy executives, welfare recipients, immigrants, refugees, people who hold conservative political opinions, people who hold liberal political opinions..... How have I distorted the self-sacrificing, egalitarian love of God into self-serving, exclusionary elitism? What boundaries do I wrongly build or might I bravely shatter?”*

Following Jesus’ response to the Pharisees, he does something quite interesting. He intentionally begins addressing the disciples, and that includes you and me. Jesus begins to take us to a much deeper place by teaching even more about the human heart which, by the way, in the Bible is a metaphor for one’s whole being, for the total person. He begins to explain his teaching about the human heart and the problem of evil. Jesus says, “It’s not what you swallow that pollutes your life.” With this statement, Jesus begins diagnosing a form of heart disease that comes from within. He is talking about the stuff that **originates** in the human heart. Jesus is saying it is **not** what we touch that makes us unclean and it is **not** what goes into us that makes us unclean. Instead, it is what is deep in our hearts and then comes out of our mouths through the harmful and hurtful things we say, and through the harmful actions we take - this is what is unclean. This is the stuff that pollutes, the stuff that ruins relationships and destroys communities.

Jesus' life and death was all about addressing the human heart, the totality of our beings. And, the gospel good news is that Jesus turns the purity code system upside down and inside out when he teaches of a radically new social vision. Instead of hearts that pollute, Jesus announces that, through him, our hearts are **transformed**. Through Jesus' life, ministry and death, he introduces a radical alternative to community. He proclaimed his vision of a new community where the transformed **heart** is the **source** of **compassion** - compassion for all, even those we might not like and even those we consider dirty and unclean. Through this vision of a new community, there is **not** a focus on "external compliance to purity codes, but an internal compassion for all." The late contemporary theologian and thinker, Marcus Borg, suggested that in place of the Old Testament, Leviticus mandate of "be holy, for I am holy" (Leviticus 19:2), Jesus intentionally and deliberately calls us to "be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." (Luke 3:36) And, Jesus calls us to live into **his** vision of community – one that is **not** shaped by politics of purity, but by **politics of compassion**. (Marcus Borg)

You know something, as I think about our present context, I know our culture is experiencing a deadly form of heart disease. And, I have to wonder if we, who make up the body of Christ, have too often not only been

shaped by politics of purity, by not wanting to touch those considered other, not wanting to get our hands dirty. I know our culture needs a heart transplant and maybe we need a heart transplant.

Jesus is calling us to live into **his** vision of community where we practice and live a **politics of compassion**. Isn't it interesting that, in the person of Jesus, God **intentionally** enters into the very dirt of **our** lives, to love us as we are and to change us from within by changing our hearts? Just maybe, as we love others and live into Jesus' vision of community, we need to let go of some of **our** sacred cows, be less focused on cleanliness and a politics of purity, and become a bit more willing to get our hands dirty and live into a politics of compassion.