

Mark 7:14-23 (Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost/Proper 17—Series B)

“Cleaning Up the Mess That is Us”

Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer, Enfield CT

August 29, 2021

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our text is from the Gospel lesson recorded in Mark 7:

¹⁴And when Jesus again called together the crowd, He said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand. ¹⁵There is nothing outside of a person which is able to defile him by going into him, but the things that come out from a person are what defile the person.” ¹⁷And when He entered the house coming from the crowd, His disciples asked Him about the parable. ¹⁸And He said to them, “So you also are without understanding? Do you know comprehend that everything that goes into a person from outside is not able to defile him ¹⁹because it does not enter there, into his heart, but into his belly, and it goes out into the latrine?” (He said this purifying all foods that there are.) ²⁰And He continued to say, “That which goes out of a person, that defiles the person. ²¹For from within, out of the heart of people, the bad reasonings go out, sexual immoralities, thefts, murders, ²²adulteries, greedinesses, wickednesses, deceit, sensuality, jealousy, blasphemy, arrogance, foolishness. ²³All these evil things go out from inside and defile the person.”

In the Old Testament biblical world, people became defiled or unclean before God in many ways. Certain foods, particularly bloody or rotten foods, were unclean. Infectious skin diseases, such as leprosy, could cause a person to become unclean. Mildew could render clothes or homes unclean. For all of these situations, God prescribed procedures for restoring a person or a thing to its clean state. Before God’s people could enter the sanctuary and share in God’s holiness, they, too, needed to be purified. God purified by means of sacrifices and rituals every person and thing that was properly admitted into His presence. God decided who was fit for access to Him and involvement in the divine service. God’s holiness was the criterion for the definition of what was clean or unclean.

All of this is only a window on a more profound and troubling uncleanness that affects every person. Before God, all people are unclean, tainted, polluted, in other words, defiled. Jesus brings out this point in our text by getting at the heart of clean versus unclean. “There

is nothing outside of a person which is able to defile him by going into him, but the things that come out from a person are what defile the person. . . . For from within, out of the heart of people, the bad reasonings go out, sexual immoralities, thefts, murders, adulteries, greedinesses, wickednesses, deceit, sensuality, jealousy, blasphemy, arrogance, foolishness. All these evil things go out from inside and defile the person.”

Jesus is moving His disciples, once again, beyond our fascination with the physical (like manna/bread) to the spiritual. Unwashed hands, non-kosher food, mold, mildew, skin infections, and so on, are physical reminders of the spiritual uncleanness that comes from within people. The real point of “clean” versus “unclean” lies in the condition of the human heart. Thus, we confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean. This uncleanness doesn’t come from outside, from physical things. We are sinful and unclean because we have sinned against God in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. It’s what comes out from our sinful nature that defiles us before the holy God.

According to the Word of God, we believe, teach, and confess that “since the fall of Adam, all human beings who are born in the natural way are conceived and born in sin. This means that from birth they are full of evil lust and inclination and cannot by nature possess true fear of God and true faith in God.”¹ Human beings covet because we are by nature covetous. We are greedy because we are by nature selfish. We sin because by nature we are sinful. By nature, people love themselves more than God or our neighbor. We envy others.

¹ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Accordance electronic ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 36-38.

We are self-centered. We are immoral. Yes, we are by nature defiled, unclean, and not holy as God demands.

God is holy. He is set apart, without sin. Our spiritual filthiness is a personal offense to Him. David asks in Psalm 24, "Who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully." Because we are by nature unclean, without pure hearts, we will never have access to Him on our own. He will never come near us, as long as we remain contaminated.

But God did just that. He did the unthinkable. God did the unimaginable! He came and dwelt among us. He entered into our defiled existence! "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Galatians 4:4-5). Our Lord Jesus came into our corrupted reality and shed His blood so that we might be made clean from sin. It is the blood of Jesus poured out for us on the cross that cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7b). It removes the stain, the rottenness, the disease, the corruption, the defilement from us. The good news is that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us! (Rom. 5:8). Jesus did not run away from us and our uncleanness. He came to seek and to save the lost and give up His life as a ransom for many. Jesus came to eat with tax collectors and sinners. He came to touch the lepers. Jesus came to cleanse the defiled from their sins. He came to call, not the righteous, but sinners to repentance (Luke 19:10; Luke 5:30, 32).

We “who were once far away, have been brought near through the blood of Christ” (Eph. 2:13). In Christ, God is “faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). God does not recoil away from us in horror. He comes near, favoring us with His presence. Our God is not afraid to make His dwelling with us. St. Paul asks, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:16). Know that you are God’s temple. Know that God’s Spirit dwells in you who have been made clean from your sins by the blood of Jesus Christ.

God graciously provided a way where you and I can be cleansed from our uncleanness and sinful shame and so enjoy His eternal presence. “Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph. 5:2). Christ cleanses us from the pollution of our sins and favors us with His very presence. Our Baptism into Christ is that washing, which renews and cleanses us before God. In Baptism, our sins are washed away by the blood of the Lamb of God, Jesus. On account of your Baptism, you are without stain or wrinkle. You are holy and blameless before God now and forever, by grace through faith in Jesus. That’s just how much your heavenly Father loves you in Christ

Begin anew today, then, seeing yourself and others the way our God sees you and others in Christ—cleansed from sin, forgiven through the shed blood of Jesus, recipients of eternal life. Take comfort and joy in your Baptism and live in its holy washing daily. Approach God without fear in your life of prayer. Come near to Him in His Word that assures you of all His promises of love and grace in Jesus. When you feel filthy, unworthy, unloved, look to Him who made you clean through water and the Word in Baptism, covering you with the blood of Christ. Trust ever more firmly that you are not unworthy of His love. You are no longer

defiled You are forgiven, holy, blameless, and loved by God beyond all knowing. So shall you ever stand before Him, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.