

Second Sunday in Lent - February 25, 2024

Mark 7:1–15

“Their heart is far from me”

1. A parent wants to give their children the tools necessary to make their own decisions based on the foundation the parent helped them build.
 - a. From the perspective of the parent, this is about preparing them for the world
 - i. A parent, and really the extended family, works to give that child a context for their life
 - ii. This carries the flavor of that family, what it means to be a part of it
 - iii. It includes values (the why), expectations (the what), resources (the how)
 - iv. My dad was a teacher and valued education, so he and mom raised us to appreciate the role of education in our life (formal education in school, and the curiosity in life that leads to new experiences and learning)
 1. One concrete thing I remember dad doing for my little brother and me was to buy us a study chair
 2. Maybe you can picture it.
 3. It was a wooden chair which had an arm that formed into its own individual desk, a pretty good-sized surface on which to do our homework. We took turns using it.
 4. Another concrete thing I remember dad doing was purchasing an encyclopedia, which in the years before the internet, and with us not being near a library, was a handy resource.
 - b. From the perspective of the child
 - i. The child may be able to articulate some of these concepts, values and foundation, even if not using the language of the parents
 - ii. But for sure a child would be able to identify differences between the culture of one’s own family and that of the neighbor’s family, for example.
 - iii. Maybe you knew which family in your block was the place to go hang out because they had best record collection or video games or treats, or because you could get away with more there
 - iv. As children grow, no matter our age, part of the process of trial and error is to make our own decisions standing on the foundation of our upbringing, and adding our own interpretation of what we had learned.
 - v. The unknown factor, however, is how exactly that child’s interpretation will be in line with how they were brought up
 - vi. It may be that we stay close to what we grew up with, or not.
 - vii. And that, in a way, is what our scripture today is about.
2. In our gospel passage, Jesus argued that the people following God were veering off the foundation God had given them.
 - a. The point of the argument had to do with what God expected of them.
 - i. The religious leaders and biblical scholars took as a matter of fact that it was important to follow the tradition of the elders, which had been handed to them from time immemorial.

- ii. As a matter of principle, however, Jesus was making a distinction between the original intent of what God had given Moses and the prophets, and what had eventually been the interpretation by those in the religious establishment.
 - iii. The teachers and biblical scholars would have pushed back on Jesus' characterization: for them the tradition of the elders had to do with continuing what God had taught, and protecting the legacy of that teaching.
 - iv. For them, the additional rules and traditions were meant to keep them close to God
 - v. Jesus distinctly disagreed, and quoted a passage from Isaiah which had been used to reprimand the people of God in an earlier stage of their history when they had wandered off the ways of God.
 - vi. Jesus even gave an example of one such tradition, basically saying: So, if you say "oh sorry, mom and dad, the money I was going to use to help you all out I actually gave as my church tithe, so ... sorry!" Do you think that makes you be close to God?
- b. Or let's take the issue of washing hands directly.
- i. There is a scholar (Warren Carter) who gives context to the handwashing as a religious observance.
 - ii. He first tells us that "The practice of handwashing is not attested in the Hebrew Scriptures..."
 - iii. What seems to be happening here is that hand washing, which was actually a practice for those serving at the temple in Jerusalem, was seemingly being extended "into the everyday practice of the home as a way of sanctifying these practices. There is also evidence that, like Sabbath, festival and food purity observances, hand washing was understood as a marker of Jewish identity to distinguish Israel from the nations" (Carter, p. 182-3)
 - iv. Another scholar (Bruce Malina) jumps in to clarify the context to the handwashing by region and societal status, with a temple or big city bias
 - v. "The 'Great Tradition,' as is called by modern anthropologists, or the 'tradition of the elders,' as labeled in the text, was largely maintained, defined and practiced by elite groups in the cities. Yet it was demanded of everyone by those such as Pharisees and their scholars, who viewed unwashed Galilean peasants and fishermen as outside the law [and notice these folks are the very ones Jesus tapped to follow him!]. Keeping purity laws was a near impossibility for peasant farmers, who may not have the required water for ritual baths, or for fishermen, who came in constant contact with dead fish, dead animals, and the like. It was also very difficult for people who traveled about such as Jesus and his disciples. The 'Little Tradition' of rural peasants had adapted itself in significant measure to the realities of peasant life" but still with an eye towards being faithful to God, not turning their backs on God. (p.221)
- c. The specific concern of the teachers and scholars had been to stay ritually pure.

- i. Jesus clarifies that it's not what goes in which makes one impure, or distant from God, but it is what comes out of our heart which determines if we're close or far from God
 - ii. Jesus was arguing that, with the added layers of meaning and especially of the practices related to one very specific part of their beliefs (the temple), that the people had wandered away from the original intent, or as Isaiah put it, "their heart is far from [God]."
- 3. In our life as a church and community, it is important to stay in touch with how our heart stays close to God's heart.
 - a. All this conversation of heart in our passages is why our Lent theme this year is "From the Heart"
 - i. On Ash Wednesday we spoke about praying and giving from the heart and not for show.
 - ii. Last Sunday we spoke about those dominoes of emotion in our heart and action which release a chain reaction, and how to address that.
 - b. Today we ask of ourselves as individuals – how does our heart stay close to God's heart?
 - i. We may each answer this question differently
 - ii. We look deeply into our own heart, and we have a sense of where we're wandering from priorities God would want us to have, or where we are reinterpreting what God has said based on what seems right for us
 - iii. I gave the example of how we pondered things as we were growing up, because we knew when we were going away from how we had been raised
 - iv. We look at how Jesus lived his life, and how he taught us to love courageously, to give abundantly, to serve selflessly, and we can see today where we measure up, and where we have to make up for lost ground
 - c. And equally important, we ask this Lent about the community we seek to build – how does the community see its internal self (its identity, its heart) and its external self (its practical actions) as remaining close to God's heart?
 - i. I tell you, I have been both discouraged and encouraged in the past week or two about this topic.
 - ii. I have seen with anguish how we as a community extend a welcoming hand to segments of the community (those with power and money) and not to other segments (those with no power or money)
 - iii. It hurts me to see systems create narrow definitions of need in order to erase large swaths of our neighbors (for instance, if we as a community say that a homeless person is only someone who lives in a tent in the woods, we close our eyes to the fact that BCSC identifies about 400 of their students as being homeless in our community). <https://www.uwbarthco.org/about/our-stories.html/article/2023/11/08/a-conversation-on-homelessness-in-bartholomew-county#:~:text=In%20Bartholomew%20County%2C%20the%20stark,accommodate%20over%20100%20individuals%20daily.> <https://in01000842.schoolwires.net/Page/17391> <https://www.therepublic.com/2023/12/16/a-record-number-city-notified-of-about-130-homeless-encampments-this-year-most-ever/>

1. Averting our eyes from our unhoused neighbors who live in their cars, who sleep on a borrowed couch, who can't stay at Brighter Days because they have a pet, and we do it collectively just so we can make it sound like we don't have a problem is not being the welcoming we seek to be
- iv. And then on the other hand I've also been so proud of how this congregation is preparing to partner with Lincoln Central Neighborhood Family Center, to help give our neighbors a hand up.
 1. You've been hearing of our FPC Bicentennial Legacy Fund, and may have seen the article in the paper, and you'll hear more in the coming weeks, but basically we are saying to our neighbors who could use a hand up: we see you, we trust you, we are here to help as you make your way out of difficulties.
4. It's not a new challenge to seek to keep our heart close to God's heart. It's something humanity has struggled with for our entire history. But that makes it all the more crucial to center ourselves on this eternal question, to engage earnestly with God's heart.