

Streetsville United Church  
Sunday, March 1, 2009  
Rev. John Tapscott

"AN INSIDE JOB"

Mark 7:1-8; 14-15,21-23

In the hospital you see them at the main door, in the hallways, beside every room and nursing station. I'm speaking of hand washing stations. Nearby is a sign urging us to wash our hands with the strong anti-bacterial soap. Doing this is a very good idea, It prevents the spread of germs which can lead to some nasty illnesses. We know it's a good idea to wash our hands in other places, too. Didn't our mothers tell us to wash our hands before every meal?

Now in Jesus' time the Pharisees and scribes were diligent in washing their hands, as well as food they bought in the markets along with their cooking and eating utensils. They didn't know the science of germs and viruses and diseases, but they knew that cleanliness protected the community and individuals against illness. So their complaint to Jesus makes some sense. "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" (Mark 7:5) Jesus said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.'" (Mark 7:6)

You see, the Pharisees had turned common sense hand washing into a religious ritual. They assumed that diligent washing was making their hearts clean before God and acceptable to Him. Or perhaps they thought washing was a sign of their righteous standing before God. It showed that they were clean and the Gentiles weren't. But Jesus said that hand washing does nothing about the heart, which is the real issue when it comes to our standing before God. Washing the outside cannot take away our inner defilement. Only God can cleanse our hearts and make them acceptable to Him. And in Jesus Christ that's what He does. Jesus Christ gives us a clean heart before God.

You see, Jesus says that the human problem is not an outer problem but an inner problem. It's not the hands but the heart. "He called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: 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 things come from within and

they defile a person.” (Mark 7:21-23)

Now we humans are capable of doing much good and we do much that is good. But there is another side to the human situation that we must face in this season of Lent. It’s the problem of unclean hearts, hearts that have been defiled by this virus called sin. And all of our human problems like war and strife and crime and poverty and drug dealing and the rest are rooted in the crooked human heart. Jesus is saying that these problems don’t start outside of us, but inside us.

Now behaviour can be influenced by outside factors, but the root of it is in here, not out there. Sometimes we think that if we get the economy right and have compassionate social programs and good schools and good government, or if we would only get back to the Ten Commandments, we’ll solve the wrongs in society and the world. Of course, these things help, but solving outer conditions doesn’t go to the heart of the problem. I can show you that. The current economic crisis was not rooted in poverty or poor social conditions. In fact, it seems that it was rooted in the greed for more, which led to some very shady, if not criminal activity. And you just can’t blame the Wall Street bankers either, because it seems like envy and greed was at work in a lot of peoples’ hearts. The politicians say better regulations will prevent it from happening again. The problem is that people eventually find a way around the most carefully crafted regulations.

One writer said recently that we’re in a time in which we see our fellow humans only as things to be exploited for our own gain. We’ve lost the sense of standing together as neighbours. And this must change, he said. It’s interesting that in the Great Depression of the ‘30’s, the crime rate actually decreased, perhaps because people were in the same boat and stood together more with a sense of community and neighbourliness.

But you say, I’m not involved in any of these things that Jesus lists. Well, don’t be too quick to say that, because lists in the Bible tend to snag us all. There is a defilement on Jesus’ list for everyone. I’ve never murdered anyone, but I have taken something that didn’t belong to me. I have envied; I have sometimes been less than truthful; I have acted in a way that harmed another; my thoughts have been less than pure. I have been full of pride, and there’s been times when I’ve acted foolishly. And it’s probably the same for you. These things don’t come from outside; they come from within us. They defile my heart and yours. And these smaller things can be just as destructive any of the bigger things. Envy and pride and greed have led to wars and genocide and all the other tragedies of history.

No, we don't deny the problems in society; we work to overcome them. But we shouldn't be surprised when our solutions fall short. For at some level these problems spring from an inner source. They need to be dealt with at a spiritual level as well as a political or sociological level. Jesus, who knew what was in us better than anyone said, "There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile them, but the things that come out are what defile. For it is from within, from the human heart that evil intentions come....all these things come from within and they defile a person."

The biggest problem is that this inner defilement spoils our relationship with our Maker. It separates us from God. It disqualifies us from entering God's Kingdom. The Psalmist asks "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place. He who has clean hands and a pure heart." Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God." And Solomon in Proverbs asks, "Who can say, "I have made my heart clean; I am pure from my sin." Well, that's our dilemma really. No matter how much effort we put into cleaning up ourselves on the outside, we cannot clean our defiled hearts. Pilate washed his hands after turning Jesus over to die and said, "I am innocent of this man's blood." But saying it certainly didn't absolve him of his guilt, and washing his hands didn't make him innocent. Trying to give ourselves a clean heart before God doesn't work, no matter how many rituals we keep. It's like fixing the rust on an old car so that it looks good on the outside, but without fixing the blown engine under the hood. And without a pure heart, a God-like heart, we will never see God; we will never live with God in eternity, we will perish.

But there is good news. Remember that God sent Jesus into the world to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Jesus Christ came to give us a clean heart before God. This is why Jesus knew he couldn't stay in Galilee. Healing and feeding people was great, but it didn't get to the heart of the human dilemma. That's why he kept telling the disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, to suffer, to be rejected, to die, and on the third day rise. Jesus knew that there was only one way for humans to gain a pure and clean heart before God, and that was by getting his heart. For Jesus himself had a clean and pure heart, and on the Cross he took our defilement upon himself. And when we put our trust in Him now, Christ gives us a clean heart before God. Now God looks at our heart and sees not defilement - God sees a heart cleansed and made pure by Christ. It's an act of sheer grace which should drive us to our knees in wonder, love and praise. "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? Who shall stand in his holy place? Who shall see God and live with him in eternity?" We shall, for we trust in Christ, and Christ gives us a clean heart before God. And if you've never trusted in Christ before, the need and the urgency for you to do so should be obvious.

Now you say, I trust in Christ, but these things are still in my heart and sometimes I act this way and I feel guilty and ashamed. Yes, but this is the wonder of the Gospel. Even though these evil intentions are still there, God looks at you as if you have a pure heart, forgiven, clean, undefiled, a heart like Christ's own heart. Now humanly speaking it is not fully developed in you, and won't be until you get to heaven, but gradually it's taking hold of you. Under Christ's power, the evil intentions He names are slowly but surely being squeezed out of your heart and mine, like sour juice out of a lemon. They are being replaced by the fruits of the Spirit listed in Galatians - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

A number of years ago, Back in 1974 the top college basketball player in the U.S, was a young man named Bill Walton. At 6 foot 11 he dominated college basketball. He took his team, UCLA, to three championships, and in his senior year went to the NBA. But Bill Walton didn't adjust to the NBA very well. He left basketball, saying that his heart was no longer in it. But after a few years, Bill Walton came back. This time his heart was in his game. He led the Portland Trailblazers to their first NBA championship, then played for the Boston Celtics and eventually became a television basketball announcer.

Now I have no idea what or who gave Bill Walton a new heart for basketball. But what I know is this. Having a new heart whether it is a physical heart or a spiritual heart, sure gives us new life and new energy and new focus. And Jesus Christ gives us a new heart before God. By faith in Him we stand before God washed and made clean. And having this new heart gives us joy in our step and purpose for living. It gives us a new relationship with God and with our neighbours. It encourages us to work for a better society, and to support the preaching of the Gospel, because without changed hearts there can be no real and lasting change in society.

As you receive the sacrament today, remember that you have a new heart beating within you - the heart of Christ. Let that heart take hold of you and grow within you. Go from here to live like one who has had a heart transplant. And then your faith will be no sterile ritual, in fact, your faith will lead you into life that is life indeed, the very life of God.