

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

“There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.” We are back to the Gospel of Mark today after our five-week Bread of Life summer school from John, and before we can dig into what Jesus is getting at here in today’s Gospel reading, we have to be clear about what he is not mean here with this quote. And that’s because a superficial, plain reading of this passage could easily give us the wrong idea. Because when you and I read about the Pharisees washing their hands and cups and pots along with the food they bring home from the market we think that sounds like a very wise thing to do. And that’s because we benefit from modern germ theory. We know darn well that what goes into us can harm us, even kill us. That’s what the COVID pandemic was about. Maybe I shouldn’t say was, because COVID hasn’t gone away. We’re just dealing with it differently now. But it’s not only viruses like COVID that come in from the outside and do damage. Just this past week there was news about people dying from listeria after eating a popular brand of deli meat from the grocery store. So if Jesus is telling us not to worry about viruses or bacteria, we’ve got a problem here. We’ll have to make a choice between listening to him or listening to our scientists and public health departments. But of course that is not at all what Jesus is talking about. What the Pharisees are doing with their ritual of washing is not really about sanitation, except maybe secondarily. This washing is more symbolic, or let’s say, sacramental by our way of thinking. They were making themselves and their households acceptable to God, keeping themselves holy and set apart from the ritually “unclean” world around them and reminding themselves of God’s goodness and faithfulness. They were *baptizing* their food and their dishware (and their hands). That’s literally the Greek word here in the original text: *baptidzo*. We’ll see in a minute how this becomes a problem.

Before we get to that, though, I also need to repeat what you have heard me say before about Pharisees. Pharisees are the good church people of the Gospels. They are you and me. If you hear or read a text that has Pharisees in it and you don’t identify with them, in other words if you don’t hear Jesus’ critique of them as also a critique that applies to you, then you’re probably missing the point. Unfortunately, we Christians have a long history of misreading and misusing texts like today’s in the service of anti-Semitism, which is supremely ironic in light of Jesus’ point here. So don’t do that. You can either be a Pharisee for the purposes of reading this text, or accept that it has no meaning for you. With that said, then, let’s jump into Jesus’ three critiques of the Pharisees in this reading to see how they are also critiques of us, and then what we can do about them – or rather, what God is doing about them.

The first critique has to do with how the Pharisees are using the “tradition of the elders.” This critique is subtler than the other two because Jesus doesn’t address it directly in this passage. But it’s what sets off his reaction to the Pharisees. This tradition of “baptizing” hands and food and cups and kettles is not necessarily, in and of itself, a bad thing. As I said, it was intended to help remind people of God’s goodness. And that’s a good thing. But you will not read anywhere about Jesus popping into random Pharisees’ homes and telling them to knock it off with the ritual cookware baptizing. It’s the Pharisees who bring this up, who notice that Jesus’ disciples are *not* following this tradition. They are using the traditions as markers to divide people, to signal who is a good person and who isn’t. In other words, they are weaponizing a good thing to elevate themselves over others, as if their goodness somehow depended on others being bad. Do you ever do this? I know I do. I’m not proud of it. I did it during the pandemic when I saw people not wearing masks in stores. Not only did I judge their behavior, which there is a place for (though

maybe not *my* place), but I also used this to give myself an ego boost. “I’m a good person,” I told myself, “because I *am* wearing a mask!” Masks were a good thing. But good things can be used badly, against others, if only in my own mind. And I do that. And I expect you do too. And Jesus has a problem with that.

Jesus’ second critique flows from this first one. The Pharisees in their preoccupation with misusing good things “abandon the commandment of God.” Jesus will make clear later in Mark 12 what he understands the essence of this commandment to be, namely to love God with all your heart, and soul and mind and strength, and then he will connect it to loving our neighbor as ourselves. The point is that when we busy ourselves with dividing the world into good guys and bad guys, and making our kind of people the good guys at the expense of other kinds of people, then we cut ourselves off from God’s agenda for us in favor of our own personal agendas. Jesus has a problem with that too.

Jesus’ third critique then follows from this second one. It’s our hearts that are the problem. They are set on the wrong things. Instead of loving God and our neighbors, we love only ourselves and our own kind, and use God and our neighbors to serve ourselves. And we can’t fix this problem by what we eat or how we prepare our dishware, or any of our other pious rituals. Jesus uses a graphic example here that for some reason is cut out of our reading. The problem is not with what you eat, he says. What goes into the mouth goes down into the stomach and out the other end. It doesn’t go to the heart, and so it doesn’t address the problem. Now let’s be clear that when Jesus talks about the heart here, he is not talking about the circulatory system. This is a more figurative use of heart as the place where emotions and attitudes come from, and in the ancient world, where thoughts come from. The heart is where the problem lies, because what is coming out of our hearts in our current condition, is problematic – that long list that Jesus gives at the end of the reading. They stem, of course, from our captivity to sin. It’s popular in our culture to believe that humans are basically good when you get right down to it, and that what makes people bad are external conditions, how we are brought up, our environment, our nutrition, our education, and so on. And this in some ways lines up with the Pharisees approach. Jesus does not agree. To be sure, God *creates* us to be good. God *intends* for us to be good. But in our current condition, even when we are at our very best, we fall fatally short of God’s good intentions for us. And Jesus also has a problem with that.

The heart is where the crisis is, dear people. Instead of pumping out love for God and neighbor, our hearts are pumping out all of those nasty things that Jesus lists. If you don’t think the beginning of the list applies to you, we’ll have to look more closely at the Sermon on the Mount sometime – or Luther’s Small Catechism. But for now, let’s look further down the list: avarice, deceit, envy, pride? And let’s not forget slander. How are you doing with those? An honest examination reveals the diagnosis. What we have is heart failure, and it is terminal. What we need, to use the imagery of the prophet Ezekiel, is a transplant. We need God to replace our hearts of stone with beating hearts of flesh. And in Jesus that is what we get. He becomes our donor. He takes our defective hearts for himself on the cross and gives us his healthy heart in exchange. That’s what we get in Holy Baptism. But when you get a transplant, you need to take medicine to prevent rejection. And that’s why God also implants God word in us, to use James’ imagery in our second reading. It’s why we gather as the church for regular doses of that medicine in word and sacrament, which works in us to transform us, by the power of the Holy Spirit, into the healthy, loving children of God that we were created to be.

There is no better news than that for dying people. May we, by the grace of God, trust this marvelous promise of life. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.