

August 29, 2021
Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

“Hands Undefiled”

Mark 7:14-23

When it comes to living a more sanctified and holy life most Christians make a start of things in the obvious place—our lives. Makes sense, right? We confess our sins to Christ and beg His forgiveness so it just makes sense that the starting point for doing things better would be to start with the sinning.

So we try to curb those words, actions, behaviors that we know are counter to Almighty God’s design for us. We may even have some amount of success. We may even be able to eliminate completely some certain sins from the way we live our life. That is certainly not a bad thing at all. In fact, it makes for a pretty good society. I mean why do I say that I live in a pretty nice neighborhood? Because there isn’t a lot of blatant sin going on amongst my neighbors!

But what Jesus is saying in our reading today is that what is going on outside in our lives is really just the veneer. That’s not the source of our problem...and the source is what needs to be addressed. His words make me think back to the Deepwater Horizon disaster in the gulf with sin being like the oil—cleaning it from the surface of the water and the beaches is good, but it’s the spewing from the ocean floor that really needs to be addressed to solve the problem.

And it may be helpful to note that what Jesus says follows immediately after last week’s reading where He berated the Pharisees for being so concerned with the outward ritual act of ceremonially washing one’s hands before eating. Jesus turns to the crowd and teaches that the outside stuff isn’t the real problem.

“Hear me, all of you, and understand: There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.” And later He more fully explains to the disciples: *“Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled? What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”*

This is pretty devastating. This is not Gospel good news. Outward behavior is something we have a shot at getting a handle on. If sin is something we do, then maybe through hard work and perseverance we can do it less, even stop. But Jesus is saying our defilement before God starts before things even get beyond our heart, soul and mind! Remember that fronting something in the Greek of the New Testament gives it primacy and what is first on Jesus’ list of defiling things? *“...out of the heart of man come evil thoughts.”*

Does anybody here have a good handle on those thoughts? And mind you, the measure here is not of the world. The measure is God’s holy law summed up in loving God above all things, loving your neighbor as yourself and in that necessarily humbling yourself to love yourself last of all. We are dead right out of the gate.

True, some believers may have a pretty good handle on our minds when things are going well, but when the broken world comes along and pokes us in the eye with an offense, injustice, attack or lurid temptation of the flesh, where do one’s thoughts go then? The rest of that defilement list comes rushing in before we even realize it. Cleansing our heart is like trying to swim to the bottom of the gulf and plug that gusher with our thumb. It’s impossible.

Impossible for us, but not impossible for the Gospel of Christ. The fancy church term we use is “objective justification”. What that means is that we fallen geysers of defilement are the object of God’s declaration in Christ of “not guilty”. God’s Word does what it says. At His Word the perfect inward and outward righteousness of Jesus is ascribed to us and the geyser is sealed, the defilement is removed and we are made holy, inside and out. The impossible is accomplished in Christ, despite the evil nature the clings to our hearts.

This is really where we need to start in our battles with sin and the living out of our faith. Christ has made you a holy child of God. Your defilement stands removed, washed away in the waters of your Holy Baptism. Despite the predilections of your heart, mind and soul, faith in Christ receives perfect righteousness and you are indeed righteous in the sight of the Heavenly Father. If you are coming from anywhere other than this foundation, your battles are on you and while you may have some victories and be a pretty good neighbor in the eyes of the world, the war is lost on the inside because you can’t fully stop what comes out of a sinful nature. But in Christ that nature is already defeated and powerless—dead on Christ’s cross and banished to his empty tomb.

This divine reality in Christ is reflected in St. Paul’s very familiar exhortation about putting on the “whole armor of God”. When you think about it, what is it that armor does? Armor is not about doing things outside of one’s self. Armor is about protection of the person, that which exists within the armor.

The belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness, gospel of peace, shield of faith, helmet of salvation—none of these are your doing; they are all gifts of God in Christ recreating you, regenerating you into a child of God living before Him in holiness and blessedness forever. The armor of God keeps you as what He has made you—undefiled!

The only outward equipment described is “*the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God*” and that makes perfect sense because this Word does indeed go out from us into the world, saving others from Satan’s clutches through the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel Word. But do you perceive the picture St. Paul paints? You, a holy one, not spouting defilement, but enduring victoriously as what God has made of you, a poor, miserable sinner. And what He has made you is Christ’s victory over sin, death and condemnation!

This changes your perspective; revolutionizes the way you come at life each day.

A holy one of God isn’t satisfied with being a pretty good neighbor in life. We seek to love in all circumstances, to be Jesus to everyone rejoicing in the mercy we’ve received and reflecting His grace in joyful thanksgiving.

Does your life not look so good, maybe seems a train wreck of sin and selfishness? Not so! You are a holy child of God by God’s doing! You are a victor in Christ over that sin. Each day you step out in His triumph, once again entering the struggle against that sin, knowing Jesus has robbed it of any power to condemn you.

Jesus’ words today make it quite plain—of yourself, no matter how it may look on the outside, on the inside you’re a gushing sewer of defilement, condemned never to draw near the presence of a holy and righteous God.

But in Christ, through Christ and by Christ, you are placed this very day into the holy and righteous presence of God and this is only possible because you have been made holy and righteous—fit for His presence. And there is the starting point for each and every day of your life.

Baptized—you are holy. Partaking of Christ’s body and blood in the Supper—you are forgiven. The Gospel Word declaring you not guilty—you are righteous. That is who you truly

are, by Christ's work to redeem you standing solidly victorious in the very armor of God. Each day step into your life in Christ boldly, knowing that no matter how things may seem on the outside, your reality in Christ is...undefiled. Amen.