

Mark 7: 1-8, 14-23

MANY YEARS AGO I ARRIVED AT MY OFFICE ON A MONDAY MORNING, HAD BARELY SAT DOWN AT MY DESK WHEN I RECEIVED A PHONE CALL FROM A LONG STANDING MEMBER OF THE CONGREGATION. THE GENTELMAN WAS QUITE UPSET CONCERNING A MATTER THAT OCCURRED DURING WORSHIP THE DAY PRIOR. DURING WORSHIP THAT SUNDAY I HAD INVITED ALL WHO WERE BEING RECEIVED INTO MEMBERSHIP TO COME FORWARD. NATURALLY I HAD EXPECTED THOSE WHO HAD RECENTLY GONE THROUGH OUR NEW MEMBER CLASSES TO JOIN ME AT THE FRONT OF THE SANCTURAY SO WHEN A WOMAN WHO HAD NOT BEEN TO THE NEW MEMBER CLASSES CAME FORWARD TO JOIN I WAS PLEASANTLY SURPRISED! THIS WOMAN HAD RECENTLY STARTED WORSHIPPING WITH US AND WAS ECCENTRIC TO SAY THE LEAST. MANY IN THE COMMUNITY KNEW HER...OR SHOULD I SAY KNEW OF HER WHICH INCLUDED THE ANGRY GENTLEMAN ON THE PHONE WITH ME THAT MORNING. HE PROCEEDED TO TELL ME I DIDN'T REALLY KNOW THIS WOMAN AND ALL THE SKELETONS SHE HAD IN HER CLOSET AND HOW DARE I LET HER JOIN OUR CHURCH. SHORTLY AFTER THIS WOMAN JOINED, SHE WANTED TO BE PART OF THE CHOIR AS SHE HAD BEEN IN SWEET ADELINES FOR YEARS BUT WAS TOLD AT WARM-UPS ONE SUNDAY MORNING SHE COULDN'T SING IN WORSHIP AS SHE HAD MISSED CHOIR PRACTICE THAT WEEK. UPON LEARNING THIS I APOLOGIZED PROFUSELY TO THE WOMAN AND ASSURED HER I WOULD SPEAK WITH THE CHOIR DIRECTOR. TO WHICH SHE REPLIED, "DON'T WORRY YOUR PRETTY HEAD OVER IT, I CAN WORSHIP JESUS JUST FINE FROM THE FRONT PEW." WELL, I IMMEDIATELY SPOKE WITH THE CHOIR DIRECTOR COMMUNICATING THAT I KNEW SEVERAL CHOIR MEMBERS WHO MISSED WEEKLY PRACTICES YET WERE ALWAYS ALLOWED TO SING WITH THE CHOIR ON SUNDAY MORNINGS. THE MANNER IN WHICH THIS WOMAN WAS TREATED ANGERED ME DEEPLY AS I FELT MANY WERE MISSING THE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE. IN TODAY'S PASSAGE FROM MARK, I THINK JESUS IS FEELING SOMETHING SIMILAR.

THE PHARISEES AND THE SCRIBES, CLOTHED IN RIGHTEOUSNESS, COME UPON JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES IN A MOMENT OF TRANQUILITY. THE DISCIPLES ARE GATHERED TOGETHER, SHARING A MEAL WITHOUT FIRST HAVING WASHED THEIR HANDS. THE PHARISEES LOOK TO JESUS AS THE LEADER AND ASK, "WHY DO YOUR DISCIPLES NOT LIVE ACCORDING TO THE TRADITION OF THE ELDERS, BUT EAT WITH DEFILED HANDS?" I WONDER IF JESUS FELT A LITTLE ANGRY ON BEHALF OF HIS DISCIPLES. AFTER ALL, THEY HAD SACRIFICED A GREAT DEAL TO FOLLOW HIM. SOME HAVE GIVEN UP FAMILY, OTHERS THEIR CAREERS, STILL OTHERS STATUS. IN JESUS' RESPONSE, WE GET A SENSE OF WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO GOD. JESUS QUOTES ISAIAH, SAYING, "THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEARTS ARE FAR FROM ME; IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING HUMAN PRECEPTS AS DOCTRINES."

AS HUMAN BEINGS WE NEED A SENSE OF ORDER TO FEEL SECURE. WE NEED LAWS TO ORGANIZE OUR COMMUNITIES; WE NEED DOCTRINES TO ARTICULATE OUR BELIEFS. ORDER AND DOCTRINES ARE NOT BAD THINGS. HOWEVER, WHEN WE BEGIN TO WORSHIP WHAT GIVES US A SENSE OF ORDER OR BOW DOWN TO A DOCTRINE, WE CEASE TO BE FAITHFUL TO OUR CREATOR. SOME OF JESUS' CONTEMPORARIES WERE VERY CONCERNED WITH THE DETAILS OF RITUAL CLEANNESS AND UNCLEANNES, PURITY AND DEFILEMENT. SOME OF THE PRACTICES THAT CAME OUT OF THIS CONCERN WERE LIFE SAVING. BUT THE REQUIREMENTS OF RITUAL PURITY IN THE FIRST CENTURY COULD ALSO BECOME MEANS OF JUDGMENT AND OPPRESSION.

JESUS TAKES THIS OPPORTUNITY FOR A BROAD TEACHING MOMENT. HE GATHERS A CROWD AROUND HIM AND SAYS, "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." THE PEOPLE ARE PERPLEXED BY THIS DECLARATION. JESUS IS CHALLENGING A BASIC RELIGIOUS BELIEF OF THE DAY. THE DISCIPLES ARE ALSO CONFUSED. IN PRIVATE, THEY EVEN ASK JESUS EXACTLY WHAT HE MEANS. JESUS CLARIFIES WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO GOD. JESUS TELLS HIS DISCIPLES THAT THE THINGS WE EAT DO NOT ENTER OUR HEARTS BUT ENTER OUR STOMACHS. IT IS THOSE THINGS THAT COME OUT FROM OUR HEARTS THAT DEFILE US, NOT THE THINGS THAT GO INTO OUR MOUTHS. JESUS SAYS THAT EVIL INTENTIONS COME FROM THE HEART. TODAY WE MAY SCOFF AT THE FIRST-CENTURY WORLD'S VIEW OF RITUAL PURITY AND DEFILEMENT, BUT WE CERTAINLY ARE NOT ABOVE THE EVIL INTENTIONS OF WHICH JESUS WARNS HIS DISCIPLES.

OUR CHALLENGE TODAY IS TO RECOGNIZE HOW WE, LIKE THE PHARISEES, MISINTERPRET WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO GOD. DO WE PUT OUR ENERGY INTO JUDGING OTHERS RATHER THAN INTO EXAMINING THE SINS THAT STAIN OUR OWN LIVES? HOW EASY IT IS TO POINT FINGERS OF BLAME OR WHISPER BEHIND SOMEONE'S BACK ABOUT DIFFERENCES. THINK OF ALL THE WORSHIP DISAGREEMENTS, THE KITCHEN ARGUMENTS AND POST-MEETING PARKING LOT DISCUSSIONS; THEY LOOK AN AWFUL LOT LIKE WHAT JESUS ENCOUNTERED. WE NEED TO HEAR JESUS' TEACHING JUST AS MUCH AS HIS FOLLOWERS AND DISCIPLES NEEDED TO HEAR HIS WORDS SO LONG AGO. WE NEED TO BE REMINDED WHAT IS IMPORTANT AND WHAT ISN'T. THE EVIL INTENTIONS THAT COME FROM OUR HEARTS SEPARATE US FROM GOD. WHEN WE MISUSE RELIGIOUS RULES INAPPROPRIATELY, WE SEPARATE OURSELVES FROM ONE ANOTHER AND FROM GOD.

INSTEAD OF DISHING DIRT ABOUT ONE ANOTHER, JESUS REMINDS US THAT THE REAL DIRT IS GROUND DEEP DOWN INSIDE, RIGHT INTO OUR HEARTS. OUR BROKEN, SINFULNESS IS WHAT'S DIRTY, NOT WHETHER WE FOLLOW ALL THE RULES, CROSS OUR "I's" AND DOT OUR "T's," AND DO THINGS THE WAY WE'VE ALWAYS DONE THEM. IN FACT, JAMES TELLS US

THAT "EVERY GENEROUS ACT OF GIVING, WITH EVERY PERFECT GIFT, IS FROM ABOVE, COMING DOWN FROM THE FATHER OF LIGHTS."

MISSING CHOIR REHEARSAL ON WEDNESDAY NIGHT MEANS YOU CAN'T SING IN SUNDAY WORSHIP IS NOT IMPORTANT. JOINING A CHURCH WITHOUT ATTENDING A NEW MEMBER CLASS IS NOT IMPORTANT. I'M HAPPY TO REPORT THE CONGREGATION SLOWLY BEGAN TO REALIZE THIS. MAIME BECAME AN ACTIVE MEMBER OF THE CONGREGATION, SINGING WITH THE CHOIR EVERY SUNDAY AS HER YEARS EXPERIENCE IN SWEET ADELINES ADDED MUCH TO THE ALTO SECTION. WHENEVER THERE WAS A SPECIAL EVENT AT CHURCH, MAIME WAS THERE, LOVING ON THE CHILDREN AND JOKING WITH THE ADULTS. MAIME DIED FROM BONE CANCER ONE DECEMBER MORNING. THE FUNERAL DIRECTOR TOLD ME HE DIDN'T THINK MANY WOULD ATTEND MAIME'S FUNERAL AS SHE HAD NO FAMILY OUTSIDE OF HER 2 JACK RUSSELL TERRIORS, SUGAR AND SPICE, SO HE WASN'T GOING TO PRINT MANY FUNERAL FOLDERS FOR HER SERVICE.

THE CHURCH WAS FULL FOR HER FUNERAL. WE RAN OUT OF FUNERAL FOLDERS. THE CHOIR SANG. AND BECAUSE MAIME KNEW SO MANY PEOPLE IN THE COMMUNITY, THE SHERRIFF TOOK UP A SPECIAL OFFERING AT WORK AND IN TOWN FOR A GRAVE MARKER. EVERYTIME I'M AT THE CEMETERY, I FIND HER MARKER AND THANK GOD FOR MAIME AND THE LESSONS SHE TAUGHT ME AND MY CONGREGATION. SHE TAUGHT US THAT WELCOMING ALL INTO GOD'S KINGDOM IS IMPORTANT. HOW WE OFTEN WANT TO FOCUS ON THE SINS OF OTHERS BECAUSE FACING THE SINS THAT STAIN OUR OWN HANDS IS SO PAINFUL. BUT WHEN WE FACE THOSE SINS, LETTING GO OF THAT WHICH IS UNIMPORTANT, AND TURN TO GOD, WE ARE ALL WELCOME AND BECOME FAMILY. WHEN MAIME ROSE UP THAT SUNDAY MORNING, WALKED FORWARD AND JOINED THE CHURCH SHE DIDN'T KNOW THE CONGREGATION SHE WAS JOINING. A CONGREGATION THAT WAS NOT AWARE OF HOW OUR ATTITUDES AND ACTIONS IMPACTED OTHERS. A CONGREGATION WHERE SOME HAD SUCCUMBED TO MORAL RIGIDITY, SPIRITUAL SATISFACTION AND WORSE YET, A SENSE OF SUPERIORITY TO THOSE WHO WERE DIFFERENT. YET A CONGREGATION THAT DESPERATELY NEEDED SOMEONE TO TEACH US THAT THE WAY TO SEE GOOD IN OTHERS, AND ULTIMATELY IN OURSELVES, WAS TO LOOK TO GOD BECAUSE EVERYTHING THAT IS GOOD COMES FROM GOD. HOWEVER DIFFICULT OR CHALLENGING JESUS' WORDS MAY BE, THERE IS WITHIN THEM THE HOPE OF RENEWING OUR ATTITUDES AND ACTIONS SO WE MAY REFLECT GOD'S LOVING INTENTIONS FOR ALL HUMANITY. MAY IT BE SO.

