

Both - And

by
The Reverend Leigh DeVries
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

August 29, 2021

Mark 7:1-23

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, ²they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. ³(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) ⁵So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” ⁶He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

‘This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
⁷in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

⁸You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

⁹Then he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! ¹⁰For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ ¹¹But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban’ (that is, an offering to God)— ¹²then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, ¹³thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.”

¹⁴Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

¹⁷When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸He said to them, “Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, ¹⁹since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰And he said, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. ²¹For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²²adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

Well, I'm overwhelmed.

I'm uncomfortable preaching up here like everything is normal – like the world isn't a huge ball of suffering and confusion and corruption and aching.

The pandemic. Afghanistan. The climate crisis. Continued threats on voting rights. The prison-industrial complex. Obscene and growing income inequality. Earthquakes, hurricanes, wildfires. Thriving racism. The list feels infinite.

If you had told me a decade ago what these past two years have held, I would've told you to stop playing apocalypse bingo.

When I looked at the lectionary passages in James and Mark a couple of weeks ago, I initially thought, yeah, social justice sermon! I can do that!

But then, after I'd sent in my passages for the bulletin, as I prepared, I found myself falling into old theologies from my youth. I fell back into theology that told me that nothing good came from me. That theology where I was utterly worthless and evil because "it is from within, from the human heart, from which evil intentions come" and "all good things come from above." I fell back into that binary between God and me, where God was all good and perfect, and thus I couldn't help but be opposite -- bad and utterly flawed.

As a teenager, I interpreted these verses to mean that God and I were a binary—that there was God and there was me. What was God, was not what was me, and what was me, was not what was God. God and I were a zero-sum game.

Around age 18 I read about an interview with Shane Claiborne after the death of mother Theresa. The reporter asked Claiborne if he thought that Mother Theresa's spirit would live on. Claiborne replied, saying that Mother Theresa had died a long time ago, that was the spirit of Jesus. In other words, in order for Mother Theresa to be so very good, the earthly/human part of her had to die to be replaced by Jesus.

I understood when I read those words that the goal of my life was to die, to think so little of myself that when I died, people would say, "Leigh died a long time ago, that was the spirit of Jesus." I thought it meant that for the spirit of Jesus to live in me, I, Leigh, my own spirit, would have to disappear.

The past few weeks, I wrestled with these passages. And I kept coming back to those "defiled hands" from Mark.

Jesus and his buds are having a meal. And up walk some Pharisees. They say to Jesus, I'm assuming while Jesus himself was about to start eating, "why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?"

And I imagine Jesus, putting down his food, turning around, a little bit annoyed about having his own lunch interrupted. "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites! You teach human precepts as doctrine, abandoning the commandment of God and hold to human tradition!"... I wonder if Jesus might have been a little "hangry."

Jesus then describes how the Pharisees have rejected the commandment of God in order to continue their traditions. Rather than honoring mother and father in their old age by supporting them financially, the Pharisees told folks to give their resources to support the Temple (that whole Corban thing). Those same resources should have gone to support parents but instead went to the Temple, indirectly, to the Pharisees.

I assume the Pharisees were not thrilled with that response, so they go off fuming. Jesus goes back to lunch. Later, he calls the crowd to him and says something genuinely radical to first-century Jews. "There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."

Deuteronomy and Leviticus outline household and cleanliness codes. Those codes provided rules about how a person who has touched a dead body needs to be cleansed before touching someone else, or risk "defiling" that other person. Codes where a woman on her period would need to be kept separate because she was unclean. Codes where someone with a withered hand could not go into the Temple because he was imperfect, not whole.

And here is Jesus saying, Nah, it's not what touches you on the outside that defiles you, it's what's inside that defiles you.

Swirling in this scripture about the evil-intended human heart, I kept finding myself drawn again to the idea of hands. So, like any good seminarian, I looked up how many times and where that word for hand is used in Mark. It's in Mark 26 times. The vast majority of those times, the story with that word is a healing miracle of Jesus. Jesus, uses his hands to heal, uses

his hands to help others up. in Mark 16, Jesus tells his disciples to do the same, use their own hands to heal, just as he did.

The other times that same word is used in Mark, it's about Jesus being delivered "into the hands" of the authorities who will murder him.

A hand, in and of itself, is neither bad or good. It's just, go with me here, a hand. In Mark, hands get used for healing, and sometimes for harm. There's no such thing as a perfect hand, just hands. What one person saw as a perfect hand another would see as imperfect. And, the hand when attached to Jesus, is a source of healing. Whereas the hand connected to empire, dedicated to that above all else, is a source of harm.

It's effortless for me to see the human heart as the seat of all evil intentions. I used to look at my own heart and see it as evil. Bad. And, unfortunately, rather than leading me towards God or righteousness, those thoughts led me to depression, self-hatred, and profound feelings of worthlessness. And a heart, much like a hand, perhaps is neither perfect nor evil.

It's easy for me to look at the world and feel hopeless. SO much is not as it should be. Thousands on thousands are suffering. It's just awful.

I keep finding myself falling into those binaries—to light and dark, black and white, hot and cold. My brain wants for things to be either-or, this or that, never both and.

It's like the air we breathe is either/or when in reality, almost everything is both/and.

More often than not, I choose to live in a world of black and white, where one is right, the other wrong. In doing so, I blind myself to the technicolor in front of me.

Frederick Buechner once wrote,

"The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you. There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too."

Grace is that, yes, my heart is imperfect. I can be a hearer of the word rather than a doer. I can be a hypocrite, hold to tradition more than to the law of love. I can make things worse. And, by the grace of God, I can also make things better.

This summer, I was lucky enough to get to visit my sister, brother-in-law, and our 3 and 5-year-old nephews. Our second morning there, Jenni and I woke to, ah, loud voices. I poked my head out of the door. My sister, one of the most Type A people I know, was walking past, shaking her head, breathing heavily. I asked, "everything okay?" "no," she replied. "I just... can't." and she went into her room and closed the door. I walked out and saw my brother-in-law in his pajamas outside the boy's room.

The boys, who were sharing a room while we were in town, had decided in the wee hours of the morning to use the diapers they had slept in... as swords. They had been playing in their room, flinging the remnants of those *used* diapers everywhere. Debbie had walked into flying poop and diaper junk on the ceiling, walls, curtains, bed, everywhere. Trey (their dad) told them there would be consequences and that they needed to clean up the mess they made. He gave them some rags to clean up and, boldly, walked away. Then, Jenni and I went downstairs to start the coffee, and as we sat down to drink coffee with my sister, Trey came stamping down the stairs.

Debbie looked at her husband's face and just said, "what did they do now."

Trey, livid, said, "Instead of using the rags I gave them to clean up, they used – I—they used, Debbie, they used hemorrhoid wipes they found in the bathroom. Hemorrhoid wipes!" The whole room was consequently slimy and smelled even worse.

I tried so hard to hold in my giggles at my sister's silently fury as they got up to go do some really real parenting together.

Jenni and I sat, shaking with laughter. I then, like any good sister, texted our entire family to tell them about what happened. It was amazing.

My sister and brother-in-law adore their sons. And, sometimes their sons make really bad choices. Choices that don't respect where they live, the people who care for them, or even really themselves. And, my sister and brother-in-law wouldn't give up their sons for anything. They love their sons more than life itself.

The world is a mess. It needs a lot of love. But, I'm gathering, it's worth it. I have moments when I rage at God, so angry about the state of the world. But then, I stumble onto the poetry of folks like Amanda Gorman, that young woman who spoke at the inauguration and was the first black youth poet laureate, that remind me the world is more than suffering.

This poem is called "The Miracle of Morning". She wrote it in the first few months of the pandemic. And I still need to hear it.

The Miracle of Morning

by Amanda Gorman

I thought I'd awaken to a world in mourning.
Heavy clouds crowding, a society storming.
But there's something different on this golden morning.
Something magical in the sunlight, wide and warming.

I see a dad with a stroller taking a jog.
Across the street, a bright-eyed girl chases her dog.
A grandma on a porch fingers her rosaries.
She grins as her young neighbor brings her groceries.

While we might feel small, separate, and all alone,
Our people have never been more closely tethered.
The question isn't if we can weather this unknown,
But how we will weather this unknown together.

So on this meaningful morn, we mourn and we mend.
Like light, we can't be broken, even when we bend.

As one, we will defeat both despair and disease.
We stand with healthcare heroes and all employees;
With families, libraries, waiters, schools, artists;
Businesses, restaurants, and hospitals hit hardest.

We ignite not in the light, but in lack thereof,
For it is in loss that we truly learn to love.
In this chaos, we will discover clarity.
In suffering, we must find solidarity.

For it's our grief that gives us our gratitude,
Shows us how to find hope, if we ever lose it.
So ensure that this ache wasn't endured in vain:
Do not ignore the pain. Give it purpose. Use it.

Read children's books, dance alone to DJ music.
Know that this distance will make our hearts grow fonder.
From these waves of woes our world will emerge stronger.

We'll observe how the burdens braved by humankind
Are also the moments that make us humans kind;
Let each morning find us courageous, brought closer;
Heeding the light before the fight is over.
When this ends, we'll smile sweetly, finally seeing
In testing times, we became the best of beings.

Amen.