



# Sunday's Sermon

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Growing Together in Christ to Love and Serve All People

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## Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

August 29, 2021

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

Grace to you and peace from God, our creator, and from our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

We're back in Mark's gospel after five weeks of conversation between Jesus and the crowds in *John's* gospel after he feeds at least five thousand people. And the reading today starts with an argument between Jesus and the Pharisees.

What we read today doesn't include some of the details of what was said, but what it boils down to is that Jesus takes issue with their concerns over whether people followed the law - which is something they argued about on a regular basis.

In this particular situation, it was the fact that some of the disciples didn't honor the purity law and ate without washing their hands. And Jesus isn't disputing the importance of the law or, in this case, trying to say that people *shouldn't* wash their hands before eating.

He grew up honoring God's law - his parents taught him the importance of it. But what he saw in the Pharisee's actions was that they'd stopped understanding the law as a gift of God's love. That is, as a way of expressing their relationship to God in a way that gives life. And that instead they were using it as a way to punish people who didn't follow it to the letter.

In other words, in effect they were saying, "Hey - you didn't wash your hands. Go sit over there" and excluding people from the community, instead of saying, "Hey - we have some soap and water over here, why don't you come clean up?"

And when Jesus tells the Pharisees that, in following the letter of the law, they've lost sight of the commandment to love God above all else - he exposed the reality of the sin that's in their hearts. In a manner of speaking, he held up a mirror and reminded them of what they look like. And we can imagine how well that went over.

Not one person that I know, including me, likes it when someone points out a discrepancy between the way we *actually* live and the way God *calls* us to live. We like to believe that we're doing what we're supposed to be doing all of the time - and we *want* to be doing that. But the truth is that we need people in our lives who hold the mirror up for us.

Because the reality is that human beings today aren't any different than they were in Jesus' time. All of the individual sins that he names in this reading are a result of the sin and the brokenness that are in our world and in our hearts. And we can't get away from it.

Anyone who tells you that it's easy to live what we believe as people of faith - that it's easy to love God and love our neighbor *all* of the time - really doesn't know what they're talking about. Life is messy and incredibly complex and the decisions we have to make day-to-day aren't always clear.

And we get caught up in the confusion of it all more times than we care to think about, and we end up justifying our actions and it gets more and more convoluted. But eventually someone calls out our behavior, and names the traps we've fallen into - like lying, manipulating others, or turning a blind eye to a situation, being greedy, and so on.

They hold up a mirror and remind us of what we look like. And Jesus meets us in that moment - in the confusion and the traps and the sin. But he doesn't meet us there to judge or to condemn. He meets us there to remind us how deeply God loves us, and to remind us that in him, in Jesus, there is no sin too big or too awful that it won't be forgiven.

The statement of confession we've been using this summer is pretty direct and names some specific behaviors - staying where we're comfortable instead of following God into places we don't want to go, loving ourselves *instead of* loving our neighbors and enemies, not giving our best gifts and energy. I know that, for me, naming sinful behaviors like this makes me feel uncomfortable.

When I was on internship, the confession we used that summer was even more direct. And I learned that there were several people who refused to say it during worship because it was so direct. When I asked why, they told me that they felt it was wrong to honestly name the specifics, and they were offended by it and wanted to go back to the "old way" of saying it:

"...we have sinned against you in thought, word and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone - because it's a nicer way of saying it. And that's true, it is a much softer wording. But it also leaves a lot of room for people to say, "Oh no - that isn't what I did..."

Naming sin and sinful actions is like standing the doorway of a darkened room trying to decide whether you'll turn on the light or not. Because there are cockroaches in there. Or mice. Or whatever your creepy-crawly of choice is. Take your pick. It's in there.

If you leave the light off, they're still there but you don't have to deal with them. But turning on the light exposes them in all their nastiness and shows you what it is that you need to deal with.

Naming our sin and our sinful actions for what they are is the only way to begin to get rid of them,

None of this is about pointing fingers and naming other people's sins while ignoring our own. And please hear this: it also isn't about beating ourselves up when someone holds up the mirror to our own actions. That isn't what Jesus was getting at, and it isn't what he's about.

But unless we name the sin that's in our own hearts and the sinful actions we use to carry it out, the forgiveness, good news, Gospel, God's promise - all of the good things we receive from God's grace become empty.

When it comes to talking about the reality of Jesus and God's love, Mark's gospel is as real as it gets. It begins with God breaking into the world, with God ripping apart the heavens at Jesus' baptism. And that sounds violent and dangerous because tearing something apart requires force. And once something has been torn apart it can never be put back the way it was.

But when God tore open the heavens it wasn't a sign of imminent danger and judgement. It was an action that revealed God's heart and the depth of love that God has for us and for this world.

It isn't easy to love God and love our neighbor all day, every day. Life is messy, and the decisions we have to make day-to-day aren't always clear. But when the mirror is held up and our sin is named, Jesus meets us right there to remind us how deeply God loves us.

And to remind us that in him, in Jesus, there is no sin too big or too awful that it won't be forgiven. Thanks be to God! Amen.