

## Inside and Out

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

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Sept. 2), 2018

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I was leaving a meeting with several clergy members. Just behind me, close enough that I could overhear their conversation, was the long-time pastor of the leading Baptist church in town and walking alongside him was the moderator of our local ministerial alliance, who happened to be the pastor of the local Unity congregation, fifteen members strong.

My own experience with ministerial alliances, especially in other cities, was that they were ecumenical, even interfaith, so I never thought twice about whether our moderator was Unity or Baptist or Muslim. Apparently, not everyone agreed. Since the Unity minister's election, most clergy in town had quit coming to the ministerial alliance and my own suspicion was that they were boycotting the alliance, (a suspicion later proven true).

The Unity pastor was inviting the tall steeple Baptist pastor to the alliance meetings, "We'd love to have you join us the second Tuesday of each month at noon." The Baptist said, "Well, we have staff meetings on Tuesdays and I'm usually tied up."

So the Unity guy replied, "I bet we could re-schedule our meetings to accommodate you. We'd love for you to come."

The Baptist stopped, turned to the Unity pastor and said, “Children of Light have nothing to do with Children of Darkness. I won’t be there.” The Unity pastor was stunned, shocked into silence while the Baptist walked away without another word.

I’m a Baptist, a Texas Baptist no less, and I was raised to have good manners. And I was also taught while growing up at my First Baptist Church that even when face-to-face with someone you think is not saved, then the proper thing to do is to show love and respect. From an evangelistic perspective, if you are kind and loving toward a person, it might be the avenue God uses to speak to the heart of that other person, eventually leading them to salvation. Evangelistic or not, we followers of Jesus should at least be loving like Jesus. Right?

So what’s the deal with not only the rudeness and lack of manners but the outright “Children of Light have nothing to do with Children of Darkness” kind of stuff? My suspicion is that a lot of it has to do with fear, fear of being contaminated by evil spiritual forces, secularity, strangers, and other threats outside of us. It has to do with who we are being threatened.

In our Gospel lesson from Mark 7 the serious Religious Types (Pharisees and Scribes) notice that the disciples of Jesus are not following proper religious behavior and tradition; they’re not washing their hands before eating. By not following the tradition of the elders, the disciples are threatening to upend not only centuries of teaching but open their lives and this world to outside spiritual forces. Dirty hands lead to dirty lives and dirty lives allow sin and evil to run amok. Better to wash one’s hands, keep one-self pure, and not have anything to do with the darkness.

What these religious leaders were doing is rooted in the Bible. The Bible, especially in the Old Testament books of the Torah, the Law, like Deuteronomy, Leviticus, and Numbers, contains plenty where God says to the people that there are certain things they must do or not do in order to be God's people and remember who God is. Good fences make good neighbors. Good rules, practices remind us of who we are and whose we are.

But what happened over the centuries more and more laws and rules were enacted to remind one another of the earlier laws. Then more laws and more laws were made to keep reminding us of the earlier laws. The trouble became the underlying root reasons for keeping the law were forgotten and encrusted with layer upon layer of rules and new laws.

Over time, the tail began to wag the dog. Keeping these rules became more important than knowing God. Protecting our identity becomes more important than knowing the God who gives us identity.

Jesus calls the crowd of onlookers to gather around and says, "Listen up! Nothing on the outside of you can defile you. The danger is what comes from inside of you... It is from within, from the heart, that evil and sinful intentions come..."

Our zeal for purity is misplaced. We're all looking in the wrong places. While worrying and flurrying over building bigger walls to keep out illegal outsiders, strangers, or different religions that might (or might not) be threatening, or hunkered down inside of our own churches staying pure while afraid that evil is lurking outside ready to pounce on us when we let our guards down, Jesus says

that the problem is within us. It's our own fear and hatred, anger and hostility that is the issue. It's our own lack of trust in God that is the cause for alarm.

I John 4:4, speaking of outside spirits, says, "Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world."

Over the past decade or so several theologians have talked about the church being seen as a "bounded set" or a "centered set." Bounded sets are defined by the boundary put around them, while centered sets are defined by what is at the center. A bounded set is a ranch with a fence around it to keep the cattle in. A centered set is a ranch with a pond in the center ("tank" in West Texas) knowing that the cattle will never stray too far from the water.

We want to be the kind of church that is more focused on Christ the center and our relationship with him, and asking ourselves whether or not we are moving closer to him or further away from him.

In this story today, Jesus is calling us to re-center our lives in him and him in us. Rather than living in fear that the children of darkness might contaminate us, God calls us to live boldly, trusting that God is with us and that God frees us to go into the world to serve and give and heal. We want to root our lives in God. Deeply. We want to immerse ourselves in the Living Christ. But at the same time, as we center our lives more deeply in Christ, we do not have to worry so much about who or what is "out there." When we are clear about whom we are, and more importantly, whose we are, we can relax. When God is with us it's okay to attend a meeting where somebody different might show up.

Kay Chism was one of our best public elementary school teachers. For several years she had conscientious evangelical Christian parents withdraw their children from school and from her classroom because the parents do not want their children exposed to the bad behavior and poor academic habits of the other children, and they did not want their kids exposed to secular teaching.

So Kay began to challenge these Christian parents to keep their children in the classroom as an act of mission and ministry. She would tell them that they can trust God and that good kids with good habits can influence an entire classroom just as much and even better than kids with bad habits.

Public schools, indeed the public sphere needs the Children of Light. After all “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.