

“We have met the enemy and he is us!”

Song of Solomon 2:8-13

Psalm 45:1-2, 7-10

James 1:17-27

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

In 1943, a cartoonist named Walt Kelly, who had been trained as an animator at Walt Disney Studios, struck out on his own. He developed a cartoon strip of animated characters based on the animals found in the Okefenokee Swamp in Georgia. The lead character in his comic strip was a possum he named Pogo. These characters appeared as a syndicated column in multiple newspapers around the country and they waxed philosophically about political issues of the day. All of us should get a bit of a chuckle out of the irony that cartoon characters who made political commentary in their day were all inhabitants of a swamp! Where have we heard that before? It would seem that truth...or some semblance of it...continues to go unchanged even seven decades later. Things haven't changed much...even the fact that political commentary might shed some light on Gospel readings. One of the most familiar quotes from that comic strip hero, Pogo, was: “We have met the enemy and he is us!” That seems to be the point of the Gospel lesson that we've just heard.

It might be helpful to all of us in taking a look at our Gospel lesson this morning to be reminded that it is a passage from the Gospel according to Mark. We have left the Gospel of John for the time being and we have completed the five weeks of passages known in that Gospel as the Bread Discourse. We've now made an abrupt shift to a different perspective on the teachings of Jesus. You will recall that the Gospel of John puts great emphasis on the divinity of Jesus while the Gospel of Mark tends to focus on Jesus' humanity. The Gospel of Mark also appears to be the earliest of the four Gospels counting on putting down in writing many of the oral traditions about Jesus that had nourished the early church in the first four to five decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Scholars also believe that this gospel captures a number of the teachings and the story of Peter, who was the one on whom Christ built the church.

The audience for the Gospel of Mark was mired in a complex political system that included the Jewish establishment and religious hierarchy as well as the Roman occupational forces. These were the same political complexities in which Jesus preached and taught and healed. When this gospel was written, the early Christians were still trying to figure out exactly who Jesus was and they were also trying to figure out their place in the Jewish community. Many of them had been put out of local synagogues for following Jesus. As we might expect, this gospel contains a

number of the controversies that occurred between Jesus and the Pharisees and Scribes. The passage we've just heard is just one of many such confrontations.

It seems these Pharisees and Scribes had come from Jerusalem. That fact is important. It implies that they are under the thumb of the Romans who occupy Israel. They are beholden to the Romans for their very existence and the Romans will ultimately help them get rid of Jesus through a sanctioned execution.

But in this story, as they have come from Jerusalem, they happen upon Jesus and a group of his followers. They discover that Jesus' followers are not washing their hands before they eat and they aren't washing the food they're consuming as is the tradition of the Jews. Such traditions set the Jews apart from their neighbors as people of God...as those who value God's direction to them. These traditions came down to them from the High Priest in the wilderness when so many of the laws for the Jews were established in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. These traditions were followed in order to be obedient and respectful to God. However, God had required these things only of the High Priests, not the population at large. The High Priests themselves had decided that it was also good for the people to follow these instructions as well, bringing daily life under the canopy of God. So finding Jesus' followers not following these traditions seemed to the Pharisees an example of Jesus being careless about Jewish tradition. In all fairness to the Pharisees, being careless with the traditions was just cause to be critical.

A Christians, we, too have traditions that we hold dear and we take offense at anyone who is careless with them. We would be offended if anyone took baptism lightly, for example, or if anyone was casual with the Holy Eucharist. We can be informal with either of those things, but never casual. It's easy to understand how the Pharisees and Scribes might be offended.

But Jesus jumps all over them!!! He quotes to them their very own scripture from the Prophet Isaiah (29:13): "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." Jesus charged them with abandoning the commandment of God...to love God with all your heart and to love your neighbor as yourself...in favor of sticking to human tradition. How often do we fall into that trap ourselves? How often do we casually condemn those 'outside' the circle of Christianity without really knowing what we're talking about? And how often do we look at others as those 'inside' the circle of Christianity and those 'outside' that circle? God doesn't have any insiders and outsiders! To God, all human beings are his children. To God, we are each one of us of equal importance and equal value regardless of our mistakes or our failures; our points of view or our politics. We are never called on by God to condemn anyone or any group. If you take careful notice, Jesus never condemns the sinners and social outcasts of his day. He doesn't even condemn the Pharisees and the Scribes when he confronts them; but he does confront them.

And he confronts us as well. He says to us: "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile [and at this point he is clearly talking about food], but the things that come out of us...our words and our actions...are what can defile us. Jesus challenges us to look within our own hearts to see what lies there. What are we nursing in our own hearts? A grudge? A petty injury? Some jealousy? A little greed, perhaps? Are we having a good time gossiping about someone we don't like? Do we feel some sense of superiority in criticizing someone who clearly 'doesn't get it'? Do we covet just a little...someone else's new car, or the raise that our neighbor got, or the circle of friends that we don't seem to have? Are we hitting back because our feelings are hurt?

The gospel lesson this morning lists a number of evil things in our hearts that come from within that can defile a person, but I'm not too worried about anyone committing murder among us or even theft, but we can all search our own hearts from condemnation of others; pride; deceit; envy; slander; and a little bit of greed. And if we look hard enough and long enough, we can probably come up with a few other actions and character traits that might qualify. These are the things that defile us. And examine how we spend our time? Are we doing with it what God would have us do? Or are we binge watching something on Netflix instead? We can all do our own self examinations and our own inventory.

Jesus wants us to have clean hearts. Clean hands are not bad. They are actually a good thing, but they are not what cultivates our relationship with God. Clean hands are not what honors God the most. What comes out of our hearts is what honors God. Honoring God by cultivating our sense of compassion, our willingness to listen to others, our refusal to hold a grudge, our developed capacity for forgiveness, our increased sense of gratitude to God for all things, our ability and willingness to share not only our material wealth, but our time and attention as well. We have as many great qualities within us as we have evil tendencies. The question we need to ask ourselves is which ones are we going to nurture and develop and which ones are we going to let die by the wayside for lack of attention?

You see, we have met the enemy and he is us!

God has promised that he will provide for our needs. When we decide which qualities we want to develop in his honor, he will help us do that. He will give us the strength and the wisdom and the energy to feed the qualities we want to grow.

Thanks be to God!

AMEN.