

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

## Heart Condition

My mind was a whirlwind of thoughts as I began to work on this message. The number of references to the heart, from song lyrics, to poetry, to movies, and scripture itself is a long one. In literature it is in everything from plays, to novels, to medical references books for doctors actually work on the heart to repair damage. It is amazing to me that we have come so far as to have heart transplants. At some point millions of dollars from our local 50/50 draws that the hospital has been doing since Covid will go into cardiac care and a dedicated care center for cardiovascular surgeries and care.

We have hearts for Valentine's representing love and heart emojis to add to texts and messages. No matter where you look or go you have a heart and hearts are used in all kinds of ways to appeal to our senses and our emotional side of life.

We think of the heart as a place of emotion and a place of life. When the heart stops beating life ends and besides that, just like I mentioned, we think of the heart representing many things. For the ancients the heart represented the seat of rationality and will. Talking about the heart is complicated yet the basis of life. The heart is our essence physically, without it we literally drop dead, and we also talk of it as representing so much more.

In the scripture reading it starts out seemingly that the conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees is about something as basic as washing one's hands before eating. In brackets there is also a side comment about it being common that all Jews do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, by doing so they observe the tradition of the elders. The side comment goes on to talk about other traditions like washing the food and the pots pans that are used for cooking. It is important to note that nowhere in the Old Testament does it give a command to wash hands or food before partaking. It is also important to note that though it might be a tradition, it was not that all washed their hands before eating just like that is not the case today. We might hope it happens, but what person hasn't just sat down to eat without concern for hand washing. Sometimes it is not at all practical for that to happen.

What was happening here was really a conversation between what had become expected through the tradition of the elders and what was actually important and scriptural.

Now don't think for a moment that we don't have similar conversations in our homes, our communities, and in our churches. One of my lines is, "that is not a hill I want to die on." Meaning there are traditions and expectations that even after nearly eleven years

as the minister of this congregation I have chosen to not have particular discussions or ask for certain things to change as I know I am going to get major push back. Some traditions and histories are so strong that they become entrenched to the point that some might think church cannot be church without them.

Now don't misunderstand, traditions and histories, rituals and expectations, can keep us grounded in our faith. Take communion and baptism, we are not the church without them. Different churches do these things different ways, but to be the church we have to have communion and baptism. We can do away with baptismal fonts, clergy stoles, communion cups that have been blessed or donated in memory of a loved one, those things are nice to have, but they do not make the church or the sacrament more important. Physical things do not elevate the sacraments themselves.

So we need to separate out what we like and what gives us warm fuzzies from what is important. And in Jesus' style he takes the conversation with the Pharisees and flips it on its head. They are talking about the physical need for cleanliness that really may not even be meant as a criticism of the followers of Jesus, but rather have been a desire to help people understand the importance of tradition.

Still Jesus says, you are paying attention to the outward appearance of things and trying to make sure what goes into the body is clean, but really what you need to be paying attention to is what is going into one's heart and what is coming out of one's mouth in terms of speech.

You see they had lost sight of what was important. Such an easy thing to do for any of us. I can't tell you how many times I have been sidetracked by unimportant details or demands, my own hopes and desires, my own thoughts, and have been corrected by another. I am truly thankful for those corrections, as I am trying to live as a follower of Christ, which means one must pay attention to our thoughts, words, and actions. This entire scripture is far more about our lives and how what we say and do shows others Jesus than it is about anything else.

Jesus gives a list of things that corrupt us, some of those things I would have to get out a dictionary to define. The list runs from theft and murder to licentiousness, envy, slander, pride and folly. But this is not an exhaustive list. Add to that sloth, or filling our minds with endless games of solitaire or video games, binge watching shows, shooting up with drugs, or drinking oneself into a stupor. It is not only what goes into our mouths that can make us unclean or as the word used is the scripture says, defile us, but also what we consume through our eyes, ears, smell, taste, and touch.

This scripture is a warning to pay attention because what goes in comes out in some way, and if what goes in is unhealthy then it may possibly produce or go out in sinful actions. We need to pay attention and examine both what we are consuming and what we are doing as a result. People are paying attention. If we say we are church going people, followers of Christ, or even if you don't but people figure it out, and then our words and actions don't align with that, we give them reason to call us hypocrites.

This is not to say that we live perfectly, that is impossible. It is more about intentionality. This living as a Christian is not easy as there are expectations that if we believe in God then we no longer get to just let life happen around us. We not only have to aspire to live in a certain way, we actually *desire* to live differently. This living in faith make us want to examine our own words, actions, and even our belief and faith. We get things wrong, but ask for forgiveness and then work toward the transformation that is promised to us if we continue to walk in the way of Christ.

And though this scripture feels somewhat like a brow beating and angry, it is a scripture that points toward fullness of life, of life-giving words, thoughts, and actions. We are called to be image bearers of God so how we live and move and have our being in the world matters. Our heart condition matters.

What we do, say, and think, is a reflection of the heart. Not the physical beating heart, but the heart that can change the world. It is the heart that shows love, care, compassion. It is a heart for justice for those who are oppressed or suffering.

Check your heart rate, not just the one that tells you that you are physically alive, but the one that also lets you know whether or not you are emotionally and spiritually alive.

These words of scripture are about the condition of your heart, the heart of the church, and the heart of God's love beating within you. I pray that you are alive and well, but know there is a great physician who can heal your heart, give you life now and everlasting through Christ and in Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.