

Rev. Lynne Ogren  
September 2, 2018  
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23;

Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT  
15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Year B  
James 1:17-27; Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Several years ago I was diagnosed with a congenital heart condition called an atrial septal defect. Basically I had a hole in my heart. Thankfully it was discovered in time to do something about it. It was successfully patched and I haven't had any problems since then.

The truth is, I really wasn't noticing any problems before that diagnosis. I've never been athletic so I only pushed myself as far as I felt like it. I did notice that steep hills seemed to be harder for me than they were for my friends, but truth be told that's still the case today! The condition was only discovered when a physician paid closer attention to her stethoscope than others had before. She noticed a murmur and encouraged me to get an echocardiogram. My heart condition was discovered when someone examined my heart better than I could myself.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus is our physician, examining the condition of our human hearts. He knows that we don't do a very good job of taking our pulse, to check on our own heart health. It's much easier to judge the health of others. If only they didn't drink so much. If only they got more exercise. If only they took better care of their family or got a different job or wore their seatbelt. We seem to be very good at diagnosing the ills and failings of others.

We base our examinations on the laws around us. Some are actual laws of the land. Others are the expectations we place on the people around us. Laws are there for our well-being after all. But, like the Pharisees, some laws are created more to control and make some people superior to others. This is when a law can result in more harm than good.

Jesus gives us an echocardiogram of sorts in our gospel reading today. He can see what is truly in our hearts. It's not a healthy picture. He lists all kinds of disease—dis-ease—that comes from human hearts. Because, Jesus reminds us, the wellness or illness of the heart is the source of our actions. It is our intentions that lead to that dreadful list of behaviors. What are we to do?

When I was diagnosed with my heart defect, there was nothing I could do to fix it. Exercise would have eventually made the hole larger. Diet would have had no effect. I had to rely on doctors who specialized in these kinds of repairs. The thing I found interesting is that my surgeon brought in another specialist who had done this procedure many more times. That doctor came from Seattle Children's Hospital.

Did you catch my condition earlier? It was congenital, meaning I had had this hole since birth. My guess is that over 40-some years the hole finally became big enough to be noticed.

The same is true with the conditions of the heart that Jesus diagnoses. We have these self-centered intentions from our birth. It is part of what it means to be human. We naturally

turn in on ourselves. Think about it. Everything Jesus lists at the end of our gospel passage today has to do with our self indulgence.

We steal because we want something or someone for ourselves. We kill—and Luther reminds us that that means anything that harms another person—because we feel threatened. We say wicked things, tell lies, and put others down in order to build ourselves up. This is human nature at its most raw and unhealthy.

It would be simplest now to jump to the good news—about how Jesus makes our hearts clean. And we'll get there. But Mark ends chapter 7 with this list of things that defile a person with no assurance of forgiveness or grace. It is a difficult list to read and even more difficult to recognize as our own symptoms.

One of our members told me recently that when we pause just before the confession of sins here in worship that I never pause long enough for her. She is still busy listing her sins when we begin the prayer. Lutherans are not known for listing our sins. Individual confession is rare. We tend to rely on this communal confession that keeps our sins general, "sins, known and unknown, things we have done and things we have failed to do." We have not loved God or our neighbors as we know we should.

But we don't allow time to really think about those things very specifically. We don't leave time, as the letter from James challenges, to look in the mirror deeply enough so that we can both see and remember who we really are.

The reading from Deuteronomy comes just before Moses lists the Ten Commandments. He reminds us that this law is given to us by God so that we will live. These commandments are for our good, so that we will look to God for our life and health and daily bread. They are for the good of our communities, guiding us not to kill or steal or lie or allow our jealousies to lead us to do any of those things.

But here we are looking at God's law only from our own perspective. Yes, these commandments help us live in a loving and right relationship with God and with our neighbors. This is where our healing begins. But God gives the law for an even broader purpose. By living in God's ways our hearts become the healthy hearts God intends for us so that the world will see God in us.

When the intentions of our hearts are transformed our lives and our actions serve not just ourselves and not just our closest neighbors, we also become a witness to the world. We become a beacon of God's love that is meant to draw others to our God who is so near to us that he would send his only Son to come lead us in the ways of God's justice that brings peace.

We will see examples of Jesus' teaching in the coming weeks this fall. Jesus will teach us that God's love is not limited by our definitions of who is worthy and who is not. Jesus will teach us that in the kingdom of God greatness is found in acts of service and by giving our lives away. After having looked deeply into the reality of our sinful hearts, Jesus will call us

again and again to open our eyes to others, to live in ways that care for and serve and bring healing to the world.

The good news is that Jesus does not leave us to the disease of our sinful hearts. Time and again, day after day, Jesus comes near to us. Each time we look in the mirror and wash our faces, Jesus is there to say, "I have washed you clean in your baptism." Each time we gather with this community of faith Jesus feeds us at his table with the bread of forgiveness and strengthens us with the cup of salvation.

Only Jesus can mend our broken hearts. He does not leave us to heal ourselves. He comes near, into each of our lives and into communities of faith like this one to renew us in body, mind, and spirit. Jesus transforms the darkness of the human heart into hearts that grow to live as God's faithful people, shining the light of God's love to a world filled with broken hearts that long to be healed.

In the singing of our hymn of the day, let us pray for the light of Christ to shine in our hearts and from us into the world.

Thanks be to God! Amen