

Lectionary 22/Proper 17 (B)
August 30, 2009
Text: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

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In a village in Poland around the time of the Second World War, there was a man who was known for his compassion and care, and the people of the village deeply loved and respected him. He wasn't a particularly wealthy man, nor was he a native of the village, nor did he attend the village church. In fact he wasn't even baptized and showed little interest in changing that situation. Yet he was known, before and during the war, for his good deeds. If a stranger entered the village and needed a place to stay he would offer the person a cot in his home. If a family in the village ran out of food he would give them a loaf of bread or some flour from his own meager supplies. If someone was in trouble with the authorities, or if the Germans or later the Russians, were performing a sweep of the village to collect young men for conscription or imprisonment or worse, he would help hide them in the woods outside town. Because of all these things and many more, this man was greatly loved.

At his death the people mourned deeply and prepared his body for burial. They asked the priest to perform the funeral. The priest, who knew and loved the man as much as did the rest of them, agreed that he would conduct the funeral service, but he explained that he could not bury the man in the parish cemetery because he was not part of the church. These were the rules of the church and the priest could not change them. The people appealed earnestly to the priest saying that he was a good man loved by God. So they struck a compromise. The priest said he would bury him on the church land near those who had gone before him but it would have to be beyond the fence that surrounded the cemetery.

And so it was. On the appointed day a grave was prepared just outside the fence and the people carried the body of the man to the site where the Priest conducted the service and the grave was filled in and the stone placed before night fell. Then during the night something happened. Something beautiful happened. The Priest noticed the next morning when he came to church to lead Mass. The fence that surrounded the cemetery had been moved so that it now took in the grave in which the man had been buried. The people had expanded the fence of the sacred ground to include the grave of the man they had loved. (Story shared by Bryon H.)

And that's what Jesus is up to in our gospel story—moving the boundaries, expanding them to make space for people. To us the story might sound at first like an argument over obscure religious rules from long ago. You probably don't give much thought, day to day, about what might cause ritual impurity. But if you had been a contemporary of Jesus it would have been very much a live issue. It's a dispute about who's in and who's out. Where are the boundaries that define who the people of God are? Jesus' opponents believed that it was essential to know where the line was. And perhaps they were a bit like the church a friend of mine

used to belong to. He said one Sunday the righteous people took a vote, and they threw the sinners out. I think he was one of those that got thrown out.

But Jesus didn't come to throw anybody out. He didn't come to identify who was welcome and who wasn't. Instead, he came to open the way for all people into life with God, to make that life wide and spacious and expansive. He came to be the way for all people to live with God, to know the joy of belonging to God, of being forgiven and welcomed and made part of God's work to heal and renew creation. Jesus came to move the fence, if you will, to make the grace of God open and available to all.

But notice that, in this debate with his opponents, Jesus doesn't do away with the distinction between clean and unclean. He doesn't get rid of the idea that there are things that can cause a person to be unclean, to be outside of that wide and spacious and expansive life with God. But Jesus does change the definition of what can cause a person to be outside, to put themselves outside. Jesus says it isn't a matter of whether we wash our hands in the ritually correct way, or whether we eat the wrong foods. In fact, there is nothing outside us that can cause us to be unclean, to be outside of life with God. The things that cause uncleanness, that corrode and eat away at our life with God, those things all come from within. They come from inside us. In addition to Jesus' list, we might add greediness, envy, rage, lying to others and ourselves, arrogance, an unchecked sense of entitlement, addiction. And we could probably go on and on identifying the things that can become barriers between us and the life God wants us to live, between us and harmony with God and others.

What are we to do? If the problem was just washing our hands in the right way, we could take care of that. If the real problem was eating pork or shellfish, we could take care of that. But Jesus says the source of all our grief and pain is within, in our own heart—the source of our desire and will. What can we do about that?

Thanks be to God, it isn't finally up to us to make ourselves clean. God has already done that for us, through Jesus, through his death on the cross, wiping away our sin and restoring us to life with God. In baptism, this great gift is claimed for us. We are washed clean—not just with water, but with the word of God that declares us to be God's children, holy and beloved, forgiven and set right with God. God has already accomplished everything we are unable to do. And Luther says that for us, every day is a matter of returning to our baptism, of remembering God's great gift, and turning our heart—this day, this hour, sometimes even this minute—to be God's person, to let God's gift of forgiveness define who we are, to let God's gift of being made clean flow through our lives, to turn our hearts to follow Jesus in his way of forgiveness and compassion and love for our neighbor.

This wide open, spacious, expansive life with God is, for us, finally a matter of turning our hearts to follow Jesus, to live with his deep love in our own lives. When Jesus moved the fence to include us, to make us part of God's family, he em-

braced—with us—our neighbor, which includes people we love and care for, people who are different from us, people we disagree with, even people we think of as enemies. This is God's astounding, breath-taking gift for us. God is making a new world, a whole new life, and God has made us part of it—not because we are so clean or righteous or good, or because we have earned or deserved anything, but because God's generosity is wide and spacious and expansive—and makes room for us. Thanks be to God. Amen