

Sermon – Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
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“Something Rotten”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Yesterday, the Saturday of a long holiday weekend, was supposed to be easy. Our calendar, so often filled with color-coded splotches, was empty. But as I was easing into a lazy morning, my phone decided it didn't want to work, either. Out of nowhere, a dreaded alert appeared: SIM failure. Not that I was about to make or receive phone calls, but suddenly I couldn't. No big deal, really. I would just drive to our carrier's shop when it opened. I went back to my coffee and, when they left for Wisconsin to visit family, went outside to wave goodbye to Erika and the kids. It was only later, when they were already north of Milwaukee and I was about to go out to the garage, that I realized Erika hadn't only taken the children; she'd taken the only key we have for the car she didn't take. And while I didn't have a lot of people to call or a lot of places to go, I found myself unable to do either – and thanks to Pastor Troy for picking up the slack with some pastoral duties. The taken-for-granted means of communication and transportation were no longer available to me. I was silenced. Stuck. Forced to resort to my bicycle, for goodness' sake! A day that should have been easy became exactly the opposite, leaving me distanced and disconnected. And yes, while I do not believe that God regularly meddles with such minor details, it is nevertheless true that the strangest things seem to happen to me just when I'm preparing to write a sermon.

2. It should be so easy, right? God creates out of nothing and demands nothing, asks of us only faith and trust, that we would love God and love our neighbor. Our response? We storm the kingdom, eat the forbidden fruit, turn inward upon ourselves, turn outward against one another. We, over and over again acting out the rebellion of Adam and Eve, have made the easy difficult. We, in our sin, have cut ourselves off. Created to live in community with the Creator, in close connection and constant communication with God, we find ourselves distanced and disconnected.

3. It is in this context that our reading from Mark occurs. What's going on here? As the preacher Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm writes, "Listening to these verses feels like walking in on a family argument: it is painful to hear and tempting to walk away. We may find it all too easy," she continues, "to dismiss the in-house disagreements between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees as embarrassing or irrelevant, rather than probe beneath the surface to listen for the heart of the gospel's message." And that's important, because the argument begins not about gospel, but about law. Distanced and disconnected, how does one come into the presence of the divine? The stopgap answer after the fall into sin was the gift of the Law. And make no mistake, the Law was a gift. From the Ten Commandments to the purity codes of Leviticus, the Law provided the people both with guidance for right living and the means to encounter God. For people unclean in their sin, the means to achieve cleanliness is a gift. Such is still the case. When I've been blessed to observe Shabbat in the homes of Orthodox Jewish friends, the ritual washing of hands before the meal does not feel legalistic. It feels like hospitality, being welcomed into a tradition that opens one up to the experience of God. Traditions can welcome and create community, but they can also be used wrongly. As evidenced by Jesus' interlocutors in the gospel reading, even God's gifts can be used to hurt and harm, to divide and diminish.

4. In the wake of Jesus graciously feeding the 5,000 as a sign of God's abundant provision, the scribes and Pharisees have the audacity to argue about *how* one eats. Surely Jesus shouldn't be hanging around with disciples who don't even know how to eat correctly, who don't take the time to wash their hands first. Jesus, however, cuts to the heart of the matter, which is about the heart, after all, and not the hands. Sure, it is good to wash hands. Even as Gentiles to whom these traditions do not apply, we know that washing our hands before a meal is a good thing to do. This must be true because I remind my children to do so several hundred times a day. But it is not washing hands that makes us clean, and it never was. The assorted laws and the various traditions of the elders were never meant to make us clean in the ways we most need. Law can restrain our sin. It can, and most certainly does, make clear our waywardness and our need for forgiveness. But Law cannot forgive. Law can point out the stain, but it cannot cleanse. That can only be done by God. And the good news is that God has chosen to do exactly that. God, in the face of our many things done and left undone, speaks to us the good news that calls us out of death with the entire forgiveness of all of our sins, freeing us from the power of sin itself.

5. We are caught up in systems and structures over which we have no power and from which we can't escape, systems and structures for which we are nevertheless responsible. They are our creations, monsters over which we have lost all control. Having lost control, the sin within can only be erased and undone by a word from without. And this is what Jesus speaks today. You who are defiled within, you who cannot free yourselves, are made clean, forgiven, saved, by this Jesus who comes to you again this morning. And while I will not advise you to stop washing your hands, you are already washed clean and made new by the waters of baptism. You belong to God forever, distanced and disconnected no longer, in the abundant grace of the Creator who longs to be with you, who is with you. You, made new by grace into exactly the *you* you were always meant to be.

6. Made new, reconnected and undistanced, we are able to freely be the people God desires, doers not of the Law, which always demands, but of the Word, which freely gives. In his epistle, James reminds us that while we were not saved by anything in or of ourselves, the faith we are given is never passive. We are invited to live lives that reflect the righteousness that now lives within us. You are invited to let God's love be that which emanates from your life, living and giving for the sake of others, not for the sake of tradition. You, dear friends, are forgiven and free. Whatever you've done, wherever you've been, however cut off or silenced you've felt, you are forgiven. Washed. Made new. There is nothing you need to do. Only grace remains, ever beckoning you to the table of grace, heavy laden with God's gifts. You are free. Living in that freedom, could someone give me a ride home? Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.