

September 2, 2018
15th Sunday after Pentecost (Yr. B)
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
The Rev. Carenda Baker

When is the last time you had a heart checkup? Most of us have been through at least parts of that drill: blood drawn; blood pressure and pulse taken; the doctor or nurse practitioner listening to our heart with a stethoscope. Maybe we've had even more extensive examination by undergoing a cardiac stress test or EKG. Some of us here may have had more serious heart concerns that required cardiac catheterization, bypass surgery, or implanting a pacemaker.

HEARTS. Hearts can be broken. Hearts can be cleansed and healed. We "get our hearts set" on that which we deeply desire. In making a decision, when drawing a conclusion from facts or new experience, we might go through a "change of heart". When we need to engage in serious conversation we sit down and have a "heart to heart" talk. Hearts can become "hardened" or tender. We can "lose heart" and our hearts can be made "glad and generous".

The word "heart" appears in Scripture 830 times; 122 times in the psalms alone. For ancient Hebrews the heart was the innermost spring of individual life. The heart was the source of all a person's physical, intellectual, emotional, and willful intent and energies. The heart is the part through which humans experience contact with the divine. In the heart dwell the thoughts, plans, attitudes, fears and hopes which determine the character of a person. Hearts can hold and harbor both good and evil, even in the same person. And just as God can heal problems with the physical heart as an organ, so God can work in hearts to transform our character. God can convict our hearts, can implant new thoughts and feelings, and provide fresh experiences of forgiveness, grace, wisdom, and strength. God waits to help us set our hearts in a more whole and life-giving direction.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus makes it very clear in conversation with the scribes and Pharisees, makes it clear for the crowd and his disciples listening in, that they are in danger of neglect, neglect of paying attention to the condition of their hearts. They have been missing the mark about what is most important to God. Always with Jesus, no one is exempt from a strong searching of his or her heart.

The scribes and Pharisees were very devout, very religious, very committed to living in ways that honored and pleased God. They were concerned about living holy lives, because this is what they believed God expected of them. Yet in many parts of the

gospels, Jesus' sharpest words, his most pointed criticism seems to be directed at the most religious folks of the day. Self-righteousness and feelings of superiority are not signs of holiness of heart.

For their part, the scribes and Pharisees don't understand the behavior of Jesus' disciples. The religious leaders think the disciples are not showing reverence for the tradition of the elders, since the ritual of hand washing was considered an integral part of Jewish faith and identity. Holiness for them was about being distinct, separate and set apart, a people with a unique identity that could be seen in their behavior, such as in their strict adherence to religious practices, like handwashing. For some, in their zeal to be good and devout Jews, they focused heavily on the externals of faithfulness, the outward signs of following religious tradition.

In challenging the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus does not abandon his Jewish faith. Nor does he condemn their beliefs or denounce their important role in 1st century Judaism. But to the question of his disciples not living according to the tradition and eating with defiled, unwashed hands, Jesus offers, as a deeply religious Jew, an indictment from the prophetic tradition of Israel, denouncing the selfish interests of the scribes and Pharisees. "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, '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'. You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." In other words, you all need to check on the condition of your hearts.

This might be Jesus' way of communicating just how delicate and difficult faith is. There is an invitation here for us, too, in Jesus' words. An invitation to take up vigilant watchfulness as to just what side of our heart is showing its true colors.

What we say and do reveals who we are. What we say and do are not separate from who we are. Our words and our actions are windows through which the motivations of our hearts can be seen. It is not by accident that our service of Holy Eucharist begins with this collect: "Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord." From the start of our worship, we open ourselves and ask for God's help to check the condition of our hearts.

There is another part of our worship that provides an important opportunity to check on the condition of our hearts, to determine whether our walk and our talk are consistent.

While the passing of the peace has become a time of greeting and fellowship in many churches, the theological significance of these moments extends beyond handshakes and hugs. In our worship as Anglicans, the passing of the peace comes immediately after a time of corporate confession and absolution. Often in a kneeling position, the whole congregation confesses their sin to God and calls on God's mercy together. Then the priest stands and declares God's word of forgiveness over the congregation. The community has peace with God. But what about with each other?

After the priest declares God's act of forgiveness, she or he says, "The peace of the Lord be always with you", to which the congregation responds "And also with you". Having made peace with God, the congregation is now instructed to reconcile with each other before taking communion together. The table of the Lord is not a meal eaten amongst enemies, amongst insiders and outsiders, but among brothers and sisters in the one body of Christ. Because of this, the passing of the peace is not passive, not a nicety, or a welcome and blessed seventh inning stretch. The passing of the peace is a bold act of declaring our reconciliation as children of God. And sometimes this is not easy. Healing wounds, hurts, and broken relationships is a difficult task. It was the task of Jesus' death and resurrection. And each time we make peace with each other, we point to that triumph of love. Not only have we been reconciled to God; we have been reconciled to each other.

In the few moments just before starting the Eucharistic prayer at the points when my hands are washed, I pray words from Psalm 51: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."

There is a beautiful turn of phrase in the hymn "Be Thou My Vision". The hymn begins by making a request of God - "*Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart*". Help me see the way you see, O God in whom I live, move, and have my being. In the final stanza the last phrase says, "*Heart of my (own) heart, whatever befall, still be my vision, O Ruler of all.*" *Heart of my own heart*. My being is entwined with you, the Holy Divine. Whatever happens, help me see with your heart of love.

The Celtic Christians talked of the heart as the very essence, the very center of our being. They were familiar with the writings of St. Augustine who said, "O Lord our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee." Our relationship to God has to be an affair of the heart. We are already in God. Our hearts need to and can rest in God in order to find peace. The Heart of our heart is where Love creates love. The Heart of our heart is the One who knows us best, and loves us most, no matter whether we feel lovable or not.

Jesus' challenge reminds us that growth in our capacity to love is directly related to an increased awareness of the hidden intentions of our hearts. True faithfulness is not about clean hands, well-worded prayers, or even beautiful and elaborate, time-honored rituals. True faithfulness is about a heart open to God, continually being cleansed of all that is false and hurtful and inauthentic. True faithfulness is a heart being transformed by the radical, self-giving love of God. True faithfulness is a heart becoming well-conditioned by abiding in the holy character, light, and loveliness of Christ.

Hear again the collect of the day: "Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things: Graft in our hearts the love of your Name; increase in us true religion; nourish us with all goodness; and bring forth in us the fruit of good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who live and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen.