

Fifteenth Sunday in Pentecost  
First Trinity Lutheran Church  
Mark 7: 1-18  
September 2, 2018

In the Gospel lesson for today, Jesus is arguing with the Pharisees about what is really important in life. There was a basic theological difference between Jesus and the Pharisees because Pharisees believed that obeying the complex rules for piety were what it was all about. Proper washing of the hands, kosher eating, and ritual observances was what mattered most in life. Jesus makes the point that these things don't really matter at all. It's what comes out of you that counts, he says. It's what you say and do that matters. Jesus and the Pharisees never got it their differences worked out because the rift was too basic and too deep to be bridged.

We might look at the debates between Jesus and the Pharisees like basketball teams that play the Harlem Globetrotters. Teams playing the Globetrotters are not supposed to win so the real stars on the Globetrotters can show their stuff. To the Gospel writers, the Scribes, Sadducees, and Pharisees were those kind of characters for Jesus. But the leaders of Judaism were not dummies. They came to their conclusions in faith and with reason--but they were wrong. And their basic differences between the Jewish leaders and Jesus are still being played out in our own day. The debate goes on today maybe in a different context but it is the same debate.

Is the church the primarily holy space, separate from the world, or is the church a launching pad for service and a gathering place for the least and the lost? Do we come to church to get away from the world or to get into it in new ways? Is the business of the church to look after its own or to risk getting tangled up with others? Does the separation of

church and state mean the separation of church and politics or the church and community issues? Just what is the proper relationship between the people of God and nonbelievers? People of faith and reason can make good points on all sides of those questions.

The ultimate question has to do with the interests of God. What does God expect from us? If we would serve God, what service does God want? That was the basic question that got the Pharisees off on the wrong track, and it's the question that still must be answered by all of us who want to be faithful.

As I read the scriptures and as I have come to know Jesus, it seems obvious to me that God is enormously concerned for those who are not doing very well in life. You can see it in the Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount, the Magnificat, the parables, the laws of the Old Testament, and elsewhere. In observing the human race, God's binoculars are always on those who are the least of these. Who do you know that hurts, who is feeling the pain of loss? Who is at the back of the pack in your part of the world? That person or those people represent an opportunity for us to serve the interests of God.

Jesus and the Pharisees were arguing a very basic point. What do faithful people do to be faithful? What are the interests of God and how do we serve them? Ritual is important and so is the manner and the degree to which we are distinct from the world around us. There can be no doubt about that. The Pharisees have a good point. Jesus seems to be saying that engagement with the world is even more important. Each of us still has to figure out what that means in our own lives.

This past week we laid to rest two American icons. Aretha Franklin and John McCain. Now I understand why Aretha is so loved because she was a great singer of

Gospel, Popular music, and rhythm and blues. But here is a republican senator from Arizona, why is America so taken with him. At the announcement of his death quickly, my Facebook and Twitter feeds filled up with tributes, expressing admiration of his service to the country, his patriotism, and his courage. I have been thinking this week about why the country is so drawn in to the life and death of John McCain. There may be a number of things, but what most resonated with me was the ability of this man to work on all sides of our political spectrum and speak the truth in love. Regardless of political loyalties or partisanship, the praise for McCain centered on the senator's constancy in how his leadership, his decisions, his relationships revealed his true heart. That there was a perceivable correlation between the beliefs of his heart and his behavior in his career as a politician.

Living a correlate life is not something you can fake. We try hard, so very hard, thinking that we can fool others and ourselves with our good intentions, all the while masking our true feelings with what we have determined to be good behavior for a Christian. All the while convincing ourselves that our actions are indeed worthy of God's desires, that our actions truly show God's will and hiding our desire or will to impress others, or to show how successful we are or just simply to hide what we don't want people to see,

If we search our heart it is sometimes is hard to face the truth. We want to believe that we are basically good and loving, but the fact is every heart is susceptible to evil, to corruption. But before we go the route of "we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves," and so Jesus comes along to free us from the evil the lurks deep in the recesses of our innermost being, a reminder is in order -- the heart is capable of both good and evil. And

following Jesus will require a rather constant vigilance to just what side of the heart is showing its true colors.

While it is true that we are forgiven sinners Jesus doesn't show up to relieve us from self-examination of our hearts. The Christian life demands that we revisit, and revisit often, our heart's intentions, not for the sake of being good and moral people, above reproach, devoid of criticism, and all that, but because complacency is quick to take over even the most faithful of believers.

The bottom line is that we don't want to believe that we are capable of showing the dark side of our identities. All too quickly, hearing the truth about our shortcomings, our imperfections, our inabilities, turns into doubts about our vocations and a sense of unworthiness, that God could not possibly rely on us to reveal the heart of God to others. Luther has taught us that we are saints and sinners at the same time. And although we are flawed that does not mean we cannot speak out for what is right, and just and fair. And most importantly be witnessed to the Kingdom of God here and now. Despite our imperfections God needs our persistence in living out and pointing to the principles of the Kingdom of God when others deny or disbelieve its presence in our midst. Some may call us hypocrites, but it all sinners are hypocrites in one way or another.

So my friends search your hearts. And in your search hear the grace and love of God speaking to you. Then share that grace and that love with anyone and in any way that you can, helping to lead others to finding the heart of God. Amen