

August 30, 2015
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Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Hands, Lips, Stomachs, and Hearts

The restaurant chain McDonald's has come under fire for an ad campaign that focuses on exercise. The fast food giant says that says to improve health, everyone should exercise more. It may be hard to hear this from this particular food purveyor, which has a menu packed with calories and cholesterol and who knows what. Even the salads can be high in fat. "You need to exercise more," says McDonald's, which also says, "You can have that soda supersized." The campaign smells a little off, appears to to direct attention away from the food. It's almost as if McDonald's is telling us "It's not what you eat!"

My intention is not to lambast McDonald's, whether you're lovin' it, or not. Instead, I'm thinking about the reaction that Jesus got when he said something similar to "It's not what you eat!" I'm thinking how hard it was for people to hear that, how strongly they reacted. Whatever you or I might feel about McDonald's and that ad campaign, it's nothing compared to the reaction to Jesus, in today's gospel story, when he says, "It's not what goes in."

Jesus says this, when asked a question about why his disciples don't wash their hands before they eat. There's a parenthetical explanation about this, about how hand washing is important to the Jewish people as a way of observing religious traditions. There are ritual guidelines about eating, that one does it with clean hands, and clean utensils. The religious guidelines can be complicated, but are not intrinsically onerous. On a very basic level we can identify with a concern for cleanliness. Our stomachs would turn if someone took a dirty plate and then served us food on it, wiping their nose with their hands as they did so. Moreover, handwashing helps us be and stay healthy. When I worked as a chaplain in a hospital we were told to wash our hands, often, and to be sure that we were scrubbing for the appropriate amount of time, when we did so we should sing the entire "Happy Birthday Song." You should try it. That's a lot of handwashing advocated by modern medicine!

Handwashing is a good thing, as are religious traditions. Jesus is against neither. He wants you and me to be healthy. It would be a mistake to say that in this passage, Jesus is telling people to be less germophobic, or that he is abolishing Mosaic law. Jesus goes much deeper than that, Jesus goes below all the surface bacteria. Jesus goes deep down, to the heart, the heart of the law.

Jesus is well aware that the question about dirty hands is about a yet bigger question at hand. Religious expert that he is—and much in keeping with the art and argumentation of rabbis and scribes—Jesus engages a religious question by bringing up a passage of scripture. Jesus quotes a passage from the Old Testament, from the book of the prophet Isaiah, in which God laments the way people pay lip service, but are internally disengaged. God says: "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." Jesus gets to the heart of that matter, that this question about hand washing is not just about being hygienic, it is about being observant. The question about hand washing is about engaging in behaviors that honor not just the body, but that honor the one who created our bodies, the one who wants our behaviors to honor other bodies, too.

And then, after quoting Isaiah, Jesus gathers a crowd. What Jesus is going to say is so important he wants everyone to hear it. Jesus says then, and this is a loose translation, "It's not what you eat, it's what you vomit." That's vivid, and perhaps overly sensory, calling up the taste of bile in the back of your throat, the sour feel of acid reflux, the queasiness of a stomach emptied up through the throat, the smell of puke that makes you throw up all over again. My intention here is not be disgusting, but again, to think about what Jesus' says—which should

prompt a reaction in us.

Jesus says, “It’s not about the hands, nor the lips, nor the stomach, it’s about the heart; it’s about what’s inside. And it’s bad.” Of all the parts of this gospel reading, surely this is the one that prompts the most disagreeable, the most repugnant, most repulsive reaction: Jesus’ blunt announcement of where evil comes from, the heart. My heart. Your heart. This is no gentle Jesus, meek and mild. This is Jesus with a vice list, long and harsh. Jesus says that from the heart comes fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly.

That’s a long list. Though, as a commentator notes, while the list is extensive, it’s not exhaustive. There are many other bad things, yet other permutations of evil, that we could add to the list: apathy, disdain, preconceptions, misconceptions—these might be more subtle, but no less insidious . . . And how about resentment, cynicism, hostility, carelessness. We could keep going, but you get the point, Jesus’ point, that there’s a lot of bad stuff out there, and that bad stuff is out there, because it’s in here. Evil comes, not from without, but from within, from the heart, the human heart. Jesus says there’s no directing the attention somewhere else. No “That’s what everyone else was doing . . .” No, “If someone would have told me . . .” No: “The woman gave the fruit to me, and told me to eat it . . .” No, Jesus says, evil comes from the heart.

It’s a hard saying, hard to swallow, hard to digest. It’s a hard gospel reading, ending as it does, with this list and this conclusion, to which we all say, “Praise to you O Christ.” I don’t like that Jesus says that’s what inside of us. I do think it’s important to note that that’s not the only thing that Jesus says is inside of us. The list is not exhaustive. It doesn’t describe all evil, nor what else there might be in our hearts, nor their final prognosis. Jesus does not say that humans are all, and only, and perpetually bad. He knows his Bible, after all. To say that humans were all bad would contradict a foundational claim of scripture, a declaration and conclusion about humans that is found in the very first chapter of the very first book of the Old Testament. After God made each part of the world, after each act of creation God said “It is good,” and then after that, after God made humans, God said, “it is very good.” When Jesus talks about the human heart as the source of evil things, Jesus is not saying that humans are all evil. But Jesus is very up front about all the ways we can be. Jesus bluntly describes what humans are capable of, and where that capacity comes from, from within us.

Hard as this is to hear, there’s also a way in which it is good to hear, good for our hearts to hear, our hurtful—and hurting—hearts. What Jesus says is an acknowledgement that this good world is also full of pain and suffering, full of sin that humans inflict upon one another. You have experienced that. You have had another person say something about you that is untrue. You’ve had someone take something that was yours. You’ve had someone ignore or deride or abuse something vital to who you are. You have had that, or any number of other extrapolations of evil, some so harsh we can barely bring ourselves to put them into words. You have experienced the brokenness of being human, and you have inflicted it. Christian faith is honest about that, confesses the bad things we do, and fail to do, things known, and unknown. What we suffer from, Jesus says, is more than poor hygiene and lousy diets and not enough exercise, we have hearts that are in need of repair.

Hear also the good news of the gospel, not yet announced in this specific gospel passage, but announced at the very beginning of worship, in the rite of confession and forgiveness. Hear it in the life and death of Jesus. Hear it at the communion table. Hear the good news: God heals the broken hearted. God is like a doctor, who scrubs in to the emergency room of human life and performs life-saving heart surgery. God is like a personal chef, who prepares and serves us foods, statutes, ordinances, ways of living that are heart-healthy. God is like an artist, a potter. God, who molded our bodies, can reshape our inmost being, can take the good that we are, that we have been created to be, and create in us, clean hearts.