

PROPER 17 B

Mark 7:14-23

Labor Day is Monday, a national holiday to rest from work. Does this mean that everything closed and everyone has the day off? Not at all! Plenty of people will work Monday in restaurants, convenience stores, hotels, hospitals, nursing homes, and so forth. That will enable the rest of us to enjoy time away from work driving highways, eating out, spending the night at a hotel or camping. Even on a holiday there is always work to be done. This is especially so when we believe that we must earn God's grace and win His favor by doing enough good and avoiding enough evil in His sight. Today Jesus lets us know that it is not what goes into us that is our problem, but what comes out of our hearts that shows our sinful nature.

In this chapter the fussy Pharisees are feuding with Jesus about food and following their own traditions. They say that God's promised Messiah will not come until all the people obey the Pharisees' 613 rules. So these religious watchdogs of the day have deemed Jesus to be dangerous. Not only is He not following their regulations, what He is teaching the people is contrary to their rules. If Jesus keeps this up, the Messiah will never come! So blinded were they by their own laws, they could not see that the fulfillment of God's promised Savior was right in front of their face.

From the time of Moses, God's people had known and followed the difference between foods that were clean, that is able to be eaten and sacrificed, and those that were unclean, that is, off-limits for God's holy people to use. The Pharisees had taken this law even farther beyond God's revelation, turning His good will into their burdensome rules. There is nothing new under the sun. We want to believe that God's law will prove our goodness but instead it reveals our evilness. So we substitute our own rules to earn our salvation. We end up neither following God's law nor welcoming His gospel. Even in our time there still is a focus of faith for some on what not to eat at certain times. Jesus gives us a simple biology lesson. The food we eat enters our mouth, goes into our stomachs and exits into the toilet (literal, yes, there is a Greek word for that). The food we eat does not touch or affect our heart, that is, our spirit, that which makes us who we are. Thus, as Mark comments, Jesus declares that all foods are open for believers to eat

We want to believe that sin is something that is "out there" and that as long as we can see no evil and hear no evil, then we will not be evil. So we come up with rules to keep ourselves "pure": no dancing, no drinking, no smoking,

no card-playing, no movie theaters, no chewing tobacco, and then soon we will be good in God's sight. But we are not sinners because we sin, we sin because we are sinners. The actions don't cause the condition, the condition results in the actions. There is no escape from our natural sinfulness. We have found the enemy and it is us.

This passage includes a lengthy sin list. This is more familiar to us in the writings of the Apostle Paul. Some react, "it can't be, say it isn't so; this can't be from Jesus, He is sugar and spice and everything nice from whom a discouraging word is never heard." Like Moses in our Old Testament reading today, Jesus says to us, "listen up, pay attention, take this to heart." He lists 12 kinds of evil, six bad behaviors and six selfish attitudes. As we hear these we can identify someone else who is what Jesus says. But finally there is one that finds its target in our own lives and we must admit in all honesty, "that is me, I am that." So much for this passage.

But where is the good news, Pastor? What about the gospel? Don't say "Amen" yet. I'm sorry, the gospel is not here, not in this passage, at least not in so many words. God's good news for our sinful lives, His great gift for our hopeless condition is not in the words of this text, but in the One speaking the words, Jesus Christ. He is the eternal Son of God who lived our life to fulfill God's law for us. His true teaching of God's holy will tears us away from thinking "I've got this, I can make it on my own." Jesus uses the spirit of God's law to knock us off of our feet spiritually so that He then can lift us up with His love, forgiveness and mercy far higher than our lame and puny works ever could get us.

Jesus' human ancestor, the Old Testament king, David, knew to turn to God in repentance over his great sins of adultery and murder. We sang his prayer in our Introit from Psalm 51, "wash me from my iniquity, cleanse me from my sin" and in a minute we will repeat his plea again, singing in the Offertory, "create in me a clean heart, O God."

Jesus did not come to show us a better way to earn our salvation than what Moses had or what the Pharisees insisted on. Jesus came to be the way life that the sinful David trusted, the way of our salvation, fully and freely, the way of sacrificial suffering, the way of innocent death, and the way of victorious resurrection. Jesus is not a pious philosopher for us to follow, a talented teacher for us to obey or a marvelous model for us to follow. Instead, Jesus is the living, dying, rising and ascending Son of God for us to trust with our lives, to worship with our praises, to share with our words, to glorify with our works and to live with for our eternity. In His name. Amen.