

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

August 29, 2021

Psalm 119:129–136 (ESV):

129 Your testimonies are wonderful;

 therefore my soul keeps them.

130 The unfolding of your words gives light;

 it imparts understanding to the simple.

131 I open my mouth and pant,

 because I long for your commandments.

132 Turn to me and be gracious to me,

 as is your way with those who love your name.

133 Keep steady my steps according to your promise,

 and let no iniquity get dominion over me.

134 Redeem me from man's oppression,

 that I may keep your precepts.

135 Make your face shine upon your servant,

 and teach me your statutes.

136 My eyes shed streams of tears,

 because people do not keep your law.

First Reading: Deuteronomy 4:1–2, 6-9 (ESV):

Moses Commands Obedience

4 “And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the rules that I am teaching you, and do them, that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you. 2 You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you.

6 Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ 7 For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? 8 And what

great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?

9 “Only take care, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. Make them known to your children and your children’s children—

EPISTLE: Ephesians 6:10–20 (ESV):

The Whole Armor of God

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. 11 Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. 12 For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. 13 Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. 14 Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, 15 and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. 16 In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; 17 and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, 18 praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, 19 and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, 20 for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.

THE GOSPEL - Mark 7:14–23 (ESV):

What Defiles a Person

14 And he called the people to him again and said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand: 15 There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.” 17 And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. 18 And he said to them, “Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, 19 since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) 20 And he said, “What

comes out of a person is what defiles him. **21** For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, **22** coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. **23** All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

Sermon 35 – Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

"What is Do"

Mark 7:14-23

Dear friends,

Continuing Mark for today, we come to a pivot point in Jesus' ministry in this Gospel. Before, Jesus has been going to the Jews and has been increasingly frustrated by their inability to believe in Him, to believe that He is the Son of God, He is God, and that He is the Messiah that had been promised from the beginning of the Old Testament. After this, Jesus will increasingly start going to Gentile areas and Gentile people. He will not neglect the Jews, but the door is opening wider than just them. In this particular passage Jesus summarizes nicely the problems the Jews have with Him, and also the problems that He has with the Jews. The Jews were after all the people of God, the people God had spoken specially to for hundreds of years, they had the Bible, they had it all, and yet they are missing it. Jesus highlights why, and it ties into what He said last week about traditions. For us, this is a useful reminder of what is at stake and of what our tendencies are. We are not Jews, but we fall into many of the same traps as the Jews, and so this is not just a warning, it is a summary of what God values most in people.

I talked about the words before this one last week. Traditions are not the point, traditions are supposed to help you understand the point instead. Moreover, people are not the point, human effort is not the point, it is belief and trust in Jesus that saves us rather than anything we do or bring to the table. That is what we are more apt to fall into.

I think – I hope – our traditions are on the level, our habits, but you and I are always tempted to see more value in what we do than in what we say or believe. That works for life, but it doesn't work for eternal life, it doesn't get us to heaven.

So Jesus is going to try to bring all these objections to the heart and to the source of the problem. The Jews didn't like the way Jesus was behaving. They didn't like the fact that He refused to act like they did, washing their hands all the time to keep them clean. They didn't like the fact that the things Jesus had to say were confusing and sometimes went against what they expected. Here's how He says it: **"14 And he called the people to him again and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and understand: 15 There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him."** There it is. That is the source of the misunderstanding between Jesus and the Jews, right here. The Jews thought that what they did was what mattered most. They thought that being God's children was all about behavior. If I wash my hands, eat the right food, and do the right things, then God will love me. This misunderstanding, this sin, is still rife today. Christian twelve-step stuff is all about this. If I go down the list and check all the boxes, I'll be okay. For the Jews, it was about food, that was one of the biggest things that made a difference between them and the Gentiles. For us, it is about other things. The language you use, the way you vote, how you exercise your societal freedoms, don't drink don't smoke don't dance, any number of behaviors make us who we are. We like this. We like to gather round our flags. Being a Christian is about being pro-life. Being a Christian is about behaving sexually. Being a Christian is about this or that. It's easy to boil it down that way, and often just as misguided. Jesus says it as plain as can be said: None of these things are the problem. What comes out of you is the problem, what comes out in your words and in your actions.

Wait, I just said that what we did wasn't the point. Is Jesus doubling back on himself? No, Jesus is trying to get them to see sin, trying to get them to see that our actions, our words, these things are just symptoms of the sin we all have. The heart is

what is sinful, the soul is what is stained and wrong, the deep fundamental essence of who we are is messed up and no one can change it. You are the problem, Jesus says. Your actions just prove it. What you do cannot help that problem, because everything you do ends up just contributing to it. Just as what you do cannot make you right, so what you do always makes you wrong. It's a no-win game. Every choice we sinners make is a bad choice, even the good choices, because they're made for bad reasons.

What makes this confusing is how much time the Bible spends telling us to shape up. It really does. The Law of God is not beside the point, it's still there, still telling us all about what good choices are and what bad choices are. This is right, this is wrong. Jesus is about to prove my point in the next verses. **"What comes out of a person is what defiles him. 21 For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, 22 coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. 23 All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."** He gives a big old extensive list there, bad behaviors. How can we say these things do not matter?

They do matter, but they are just signs of the true problem. What we do does matter, but it doesn't change who we are deep inside. We often think it does. I cannot tell you how many times I've looked at someone's actions and figured that those actions defined the person. This is the person that did that bad thing, that's who they are. That's actually a lie, a very crafty lie that we all participate in. Even tyrants love their mothers or wives. Even child abusers help the old lady across the street. No one seems 100% evil, and no one seems 100% good either. We all seem like we're somewhere in between, sometimes good, sometimes bad. That's a lie too, and its based on the notion that *what we do* defines *what we are*. Jesus is challenging you to realize that what we are is written in stone, we'll never change it, no matter what we do.

This sounds horrible, but this actually a blessing as well as a curse. As sinners, we're damned, straight to hell, and nothing we can do change this. This is bad. As saints, as

Christians, we are saved, straight to heaven, and nothing we can do can change this. This is what you and I enjoy, and it is not what we do that makes the difference. It is what we believe that is what makes the difference, and what people believe is not always easy to tell based on what they do. Jesus tells us to believe, and then to do right because we believe, but that's always a struggle for us, isn't it? It is because who we are has been split in two, we want the good and the bad, because we have a good and bad heart inside of us.

The lie is that we can make ourselves good by what we do. We never will. Jesus will make us good by what He does, and that is exactly what He is trying to get the Jews to see here. You will never do it right enough, never do it good enough, but He did it perfectly, and you can't get better than that. Jesus' perfect life is our perfect life. He kept every single commandment every single second of every single day of His life, and that is a standard you and I can never measure up to.

The Jews thought that they were Jews because of what they did. They forgot the nuance. What they did, they did because of the promise, the covenant, and ultimately what God did. A Jew became a Jew when he was circumcised. That was it started. Same for us. It starts in the Baptismal font, with Christian faith given freely. God makes the connection, all we do is echo and reflect that connection by what we do. It's so easy to mistake one for the other, but it is God who makes us who we are, and it is God who makes us able to do the things we do. One of the devil's greatest lies to convince us that our Christianity is in our hands, that we're the ones who make it all happen. Christianity happens on God's dime, and God's time, and He makes us the good that He wants us to be.

But still, we make our choices. That's what makes this confusing. When I sin, I'm the one doing it. When I'm righteous, I'm the one doing it. It all seems to come back to me. I'm responsible for my actions for sure, but without God, my righteousness would not exist. So our righteous living is not just an incidental aspect of our character, it is an

essential connection between Christ's righteousness and our neighbor. God makes us good, and He makes us good so that we can be good to others. That is why these things still matter. They don't save us, they don't define us, but they still impact the lives of others. This is why we do them.

So how to wrap all this up? The idea that your works, your deeds, the things you do, make you what you are is a lie. You are what you are, and that is good news and bad. You are sinner, unable to be righteous, and that is your fault. You are also saint, made righteous by God, always good, always on the ball. The idea that your works, your deeds, the things you do, don't matter at all is also a lie. They don't change your destiny, your fate, as a sinner, but they change the people around you. That's who we're good for, because that's who we effect. There is no point in looking at those around you and thinking you've got them figured out, because you saw them do this or that. You'll never know that person's destiny, that person's whole story. There's likewise no point in thinking that if you just do it right, then it'll all be okay. Instead, we count on Jesus making it all okay with God, and we watch what we do, so we can help it all be okay with those around us. That is how we express who we are. They should know we are Christians by our love, but they'll see our ugliness too. They should know that we aren't what we eat, we aren't what we do, we are what we believe instead. So we show it all, the ugly, the nice, and everything in between, and try to explain why we are the way we are. We're Christians, and that means we're sinners, just like you. Here's why we keep going. Here's why we keep trying. Jesus rescued us. Jesus saved us from sin. Jesus made us something better than just the worst parts of ourselves.

Amen