

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin
Break the Huddle – Part 1
September 13, 2009

Go on the Offensive Against Your Own Heart

Mark 7:1-23

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with “unclean”—that is ceremonially unwashed hands. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.

So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with ‘unclean’ hands?”

He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

*‘These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.*

*They worship me in vain;
their teachings are but rules taught by men.’*

You have let go of the commands of God and are holding to the traditions of men.”

And he said to them, “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban’ (that is, a gift devoted to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.

Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him “unclean’ by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him ‘unclean.’”

After he left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. “Are you so dull?” he asked. “Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him ‘unclean’? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.” (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods “clean.”)

He went on: “What comes out of a man is what makes him ‘unclean.’ For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these come from inside and make a man ‘unclean.’”

In Jesus' name, dear co-workers with God,

The day that many of you have been waiting for has finally arrived! The first Sunday of the NFL season! Many of you this afternoon and evening will be watching players huddle together on the field, hear the play, and then break the huddle to go on the offensive.

That's the picture that came to mind as we looked at the appointed Scripture lessons for the next several weeks. As Christians, we huddle together here in worship and all our religious activities here on campus. But our goal isn't to stay in the huddle. This is just where we learn the plays. It is when we break the huddle and go out into our every day lives that we can actually fulfill our vision: *By every possible means we bring every person within our area of influence closer to Christ.*

Today's gospel lesson is similar to the physical that the football players get as they begin training camp. Before they can go out on the playing field, the team doctors make sure they are healthy enough for the game. Are you healthy enough, spiritually healthy enough, to get in the game and bring people closer to Christ?

The physical begins with a medical history question. Do you have a history of heart disease?

Listen to the diagnosis that Jesus makes.

What comes out of man is what makes him 'unclean.' For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'

Jesus takes a look at our hearts and says that we are unfit—unfit to come here into God's presence and worship him on earth, unfit to stand before his presence in heaven, and unfit to bring anyone closer to Christ.

Now we might think that this is an unfair diagnosis. "I don't have any evil thoughts right now that I can think of." But have you ever had evil thoughts? Of course! Sexual immorality. Are you having sexually immoral thoughts right now? Probably not. But have you ever had immoral thoughts? Of course.

In fact, there is a diagnosis that our God made right after the flood that sounds way too harsh. In Genesis 8:21 God shakes his head in disappointment and promises not to destroy mankind with a flood again "even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood." Every inclination of our heart is evil? That sounds too all inclusive! But the Lord who searches our hearts and minds truly understands us.

Now perhaps what God has said about the heart is only true of mine. After all, I can't look into your heart and see evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. You are good people who have come to worship. We look around at each other and tend to see only the outward veneer. We think, "I'm the only one with a heart like that."

But remember what the Lord told the prophet Nathan, "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). The Lord can look into our hearts – each one of them. I don't stand in judgment over your heart. I can't see your thoughts. But the Lord does.

And he says that we all have the same diagnosis – we have hearts that are unclean – unfit for use in God’s battle for the souls of men and women.

The words the Holy Spirit gave to Jeremiah tell us: “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9)

Dealing with the Symptoms

The Pharisees sensed this problem with the heart too. So they tried to deal with the symptoms. If I can’t trust my heart because of its inborn sinfulness, let’s make a bunch of rules that we can follow to try to keep our hearts from leading us astray.

What is so sad about this is not only does this fail to control our hearts, it also gives a wrong impression to those around us. They begin to think that religion is all about following rules.

(During the sermon, we watched the video: THE CLEAN CUP at <http://www.worshiphousemedia.com/mini-movies/9910/The-Clean-Cup>)

The reality is that true religion – the real way of dealing with the sinful heart – is not to make a bunch of new rules to follow, but to get to know Jesus. The closer we are to him, the more we will become like him.

Attack the Disease

The real solution to our heart disease begins with confession. As Peter admitted to Jesus, “Lord you know all things.” Lord, you know what has gone through my heart. You know how impure my thoughts are. You see all the times those impure thoughts have resulted in impure actions. Lord, I don’t even know half my sins because my heart is so deceitful. It is beyond my ability to cure it.

Then what do we do? Often we as Christians stop right there. We wallow in our guilt. Perhaps the troubles that we are experiencing in this life convince us that God must hate us. But Jesus hasn’t diagnosed our heart disease to leave us in despair. He has come to give us a cure for this sinful heart.

This past week in my daily Bible reading it came to me in a very powerful way. I’d encourage you to read 2 Chronicles 29. It is a most difficult time in the history of God’s people. The most wicked king in all the history of Judah, King Ahaz, had polluted the temple and used it for idol worship. Now his son Hezekiah is purifying the temple again. Verse 23 was especially powerful for me.

The goats for the sin offering were brought before the king and the assembly, and they laid their hands on them. The priests then slaughtered the goats and presented their blood on the altar for a sin offering to atone for all Israel.

King Hezekiah laid his hands on the heads of these goats. He transferred the uncleanness of his heart, the uncleanness of the people, and the uncleanness of the temple to those goats. And then they were slaughtered and their blood was sprinkled on the altar to make atonement or payment for the sins of the people. The sanctuary was cleansed.

Let's lay our hand on the "goat" that God has provided. The Creator of the entire universe kneels down in front of us so that we can place our hands on his head and transfer the uncleanness of our hearts unto him. As I think of this, I better understand John the Baptist's reluctance to baptize Jesus. Who was he to treat Jesus as a sinner? Who are we to transfer our guilt on to Jesus?

The answer is: Jesus chose to do this willingly. This is the miracle! Jesus knew all the filth that is in each of our hearts. Yet he has come to each of us and knelt before us. He takes our hands and puts them on his head. He transfers all the uncleanness of our hearts upon himself. The sanctuary, our hearts, are cleansed.

So as you come up to the communion rail today, understand that before you kneel before the Lord, the God of the whole universe first knelt down before you, humbled himself and took your guilt upon himself. Reach out your hand and place it on his head – not to bless – but to pass the uncleanness of your heart upon him. He has borne that guilt to death.

This is not something that you do today and then it is done for life. This is a constant struggle within us. That sinful heart is always there. The only cure is to keep close enough to Jesus so that through Word and Sacraments he can reach out and pull our hands upon his head.

It was with that thought in mind that we on the ministerial team thought what our congregation does best to help you stay closer to Christ. We developed what we call the Spiritual Growth Path.

If we are to carry out our vision: *By every possible means we bring every person within our area of influence closer to Christ*, First each of us needs to get closer to Christ.

Regular worship is the first and best gift that St. Paul's can offer her members. Here in worship the Savior reaches out through Word and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper and draws our hands upon his head so that we again know that our unclean hearts have been healed. For many of you, you have already made a commitment to regular worship. But some of you have not. This isn't a new tradition that we are insisting on. We are simply saying that this is the best thing that we can offer to help you stay close to Christ. Make a commitment between you and Jesus to be in worship regularly.

The second step in our Spiritual Growth Path is **Connection Studies**. These are the core curriculum classes. We pray over the next several years that most of us are able to take these classes. What better way to get closer to Christ than through regular study of God's Word? The joint study of God's Word helps us understand our personal, private reading of the Bible.

The third step is **Connector Groups**. Perhaps you are already well connected with other Christians here at St. Paul's. But many of us aren't. Our sinful hearts are so deceptive. Just when we need to draw closer to Christ because the burden of guilt is overwhelming us, or because the temptation to sin is overwhelming us, that's the natural time we begin to draw away from Christ. We need good Christian friends, people who know us and can talk to us about our faith. If you don't have a close circle of friends here at St. Paul's, check your interest in the Connector Groups. Let us help you get into a group of Christians who study God's Word together and grow in their faith together.

The final step in the Spiritual Growth Path is **servicing together**. This may be surprising, since it does include the use of Word and sacraments. How can serving together help us grow in our faith?

Let me share my own experience. When I was attending the seminary before I graduated, I listened and learned. But I listened far more attentively when I attended summer school classes after graduation. That's because my experience in ministry showed me how much I didn't know and that I didn't have the strength or wisdom to serve the people God has entrusted to my care.

Serving together will be a humbling experience. It will teach you your own weaknesses and inabilities. And it will lead you to thirst all the more to get closer to Christ through the hearing and studying of God's Word.

The purpose of a medical history in a physical is to help the individual see the risk factors. This lesson not only exposed the heart disease in a bunch of Pharisees who were making their religion all about rules. It was recorded to expose our heart disease too. The risk is great. Constantly our sinful hearts are leading us away from Christ. If we are going to be a blessing to those around us – to bring them closer to Christ – the first target has to be ourselves. Let each of us resolve to grow closer to Christ so that daily we receive the healing for the uncleanness of our hearts. Amen.

Prepared by Pastor Peter Panitzke
414-422-0320 ext. 122 or ppanitzke@stpaulmuskego.org