

## Gospel: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Welcome back to Mark's ongoing story of Jesus after six weeks of rather theological readings from the Gospel of John. And what a whiz bang way to begin our return. It feels a bit like walking into the house after school and finding my parents embroiled in a shouted argument – a not unfamiliar event in my growing up.

“We can't ever have fun when we spend time with Al and Angie, because you can't play Bridge decently.” “Right, and who bid 3 No Trump on the third hand last night?” “Well, at least we don't play for money.” “That's a good thing, because you spend money like a drunken sailor.” The themes of the arguments were consistent, and the level of acrimony was always red hot. It was a bit upsetting for a kid growing up in that milieu.

Makes me wonder if it was as unnerving for the disciples when Jesus got into it with his usual opponents, the Pharisees. “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” And Jesus is right back at them with a stinging judgment: “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me;’” That's harsh.

It might help us understand this battle if we recognized an important hint that Mark gives us. He notes that these were not just any Pharisees and sadducees. They had come from Jerusalem, the city where Jesus is going to die. It is as though in these Pharisees Jesus' crucifixion is not merely waiting at the end of the journey, but is coming out to meet him.

Mark's Gospel is always speeding headlong with his repetition of phrases like “Immediately” or “At once;” and this morning's story is part of that urgent pressing ahead. It has become critical for Jesus to get his message of the coming Kingdom of God preached, understood, truly taken in, before his last days on earth. Disciples need to get ready for the impending future.

So at its core, this charge of hypocrisy is not directed only at Pharisees. All of us have the kind of heart disease Jesus describes, in which our desires, obsessions and self-centeredness leak out around our proclamations of belief. Karoline Lewis, of Luther Seminary, puts it this way: “Here's the power of this text. It calls us

out for what we are, who we are, and what we do – in all its particularity....we have to name the specific human brokenness under which we live.”

The brokenness of the human heart which Jesus lists here include fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, pride, folly.

Much of this language is not in common use with us, but if you reflect on the list, it all has to do with trying to acquire that which we do not have, things we are not meant to have. It is a list of the ways showing the drive to consume all that we can. as Elizabeth Webb puts it, “The corruption of the human heart is rooted in desire baring its fangs.”

This becomes hypocrisy when we imagine that we can let our lives drift along like this, and no one will notice as long as we come to church on Sundays, serve on committees, train as Eucharistic Ministers. Believe me, I am not saying we should stop those activities. We just need not imagine that any of this will cover for a life whose priorities are expressed in what we have, what we can acquire, how we can fill ourselves with the relentless temptations of the consumers’ world.

But now, perhaps more than ever, we live in a moment of profound challenge to the siren song of getting and spending. That challenge is captured in the Encyclical of Pope Francis, Laudato Si. It is a comprehensive examination of the ecological degradation of the earth and the ruin of its peoples.

Last Sunday and today after worship, the Encyclical is being studied by a group gathering here in the library. I would urge any who are able, to be there for the opening up of this scientifically and theologically based work, a hymn to the goodness of God’s creation and a lament for our destructive patterns.

In it the Pope is very specific that, “Humanity is called to recognize the need for changes of lifestyle, production and consumption, in order to combat [climatic] warming or at least the human causes which produce or aggravate it.... Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us ....We have no such right.”

He goes on to say, “The environmental devastation affects the poor above all, who die young in conflicts over resources.... A true

ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates about the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.”

Needless to say, there are varied responses to this word from the Pope. Bill McKibben, writing in the NYRB praises it saying, “the heart of the encyclical is less an account of environmental or social destruction than a remarkable attack on the way our world runs: on the “rapidification” of modern life, on the way that economic growth and technology trump all other concerns, on a culture that can waste billions of people.”

But I probably don’t need to tell you that there is opposition as well, even beyond Glen Beck’s calling it Communist. (He offered to gather a committee to teach the Pope how Capitalism really works.) One American Roman Catholic newspaper says that there are many truly important issues like homosexual marriage, the possibility that divorced Catholics will be able to take communion, and transsexualism making inroads in Western culture; and in the face of these the Pope has wasted his time on “a pseudo-environmental crisis.”

Here one group’s interpretation of church law conflicts with a deep reading of the Gospel. Dare I say that this is hypocrisy as Jesus named it? In such a critique, conservative Roman Catholics ignore the questions put by Pope Francis; questions which come to all of us, Roman Catholic or not; questions which descend directly from Jesus’ words about what comes out of our hearts.

Are we willing to look closely at our lives, our combative acquisition, our connection to a culture of endless consumerism? A decision to really see our own false desires should not arise just because it doesn’t sound good to be called a hypocrite. The more important issue is whether we are willing to grow up into Christ, to mature in a longing for God’s Kingdom.

I urge all of you to study Laudato Si for yourselves, and to hear in it a profound prayer which we can all raise and live into, in order to become connected to all other human beings, rich and poor, and to the good of God’s creation.

