

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

September 3, 2006
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1The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and 2saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were "unclean," that is, unwashed. 3(The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. 4When 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.)

5So 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?"

6He 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.

7They worship me in vain;

their teachings are but rules taught by men.' 8You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."

14Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this.

15Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.' "

20He went on: "What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' 21For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, 22greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. 23All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.' "

Some of you may remember that in 1985, Tipper Gore, along with three other wives of high-powered Washington political and business men, created the Parents Music Resource Center. Theirs was a group dedicated to promoting the well-being of children and teens through the labeling of violent and/or sexual material in music. It was their belief, and they had facts and statistics to back them up, that exposure to violent lyrics and sexual images was contributing to the rise in violent crime, rape, murder the nation was experiencing in the mid-80s.

In the mid-80's, I was in elementary school. We lived out in the middle of nowhere in Northwest Ohio. There were thirty-eight other kids in my class. There wasn't a store in our small town that sold music recordings and only the wealthiest families living within the town limits had access to cable television. We rarely went to movies as the nearest theaters were an hour away in Toledo and when we did it was with our parents who closely monitored our choices. Hill Street Blues was probably the most violent TV show on the air in those days and it came on after our bedtime—I occasionally heard the snappy beat of the opening theme song (da-da-da, da-da-da, da-da-da-dadadada-da-da-da) as I snuggled down to sleep under my Holly Hobby bedspread but I was never exposed to its content. For the most part, ours was a life free of violent or sexual music lyrics or media images. And yet, ours was not a world free of violence or sexual immorality.

I remember the phone ringing in the middle of the night when I was in third or fourth grade. I jumped out of bed to pick it up but my dad beat me to it. When I put the receiver to my ear I heard Mrs. Burkhardt, the high school principal say, "Joe, Barb was just attacked in her apartment." I felt my cheeks flush and I quietly hung up the phone. I would later learn that our school's high school gym teacher had been attacked and raped in her own home that night.

I can also remember hearing about the Rupp family who lived a few miles being robbed in the middle of the night. The thieves tied up the family members, put them in separate rooms, and then fired shots making each think the others were dead. In the end none of them were physically injured but I trust that the emotional scars of that trauma still haunt them. And around that same time, in a house trailer on the corner of County Road L, the road we lived on, and County Road 23, an intersection just a couple of miles east of us, a man was awoken in the night by robbers, they shined a bright light in his eyes, and then they shot him in the head. And that wasn't the end of it. Around that same time, just a couple miles west of us, a man was shot and killed in his own backyard.

And these incidents reveal nothing of the lewd talk that went on in the back of Penny's Bus—that was the bus I rode—with the older boys passing around smutty magazines and showing us younger kids centerfolds and worse. And even if one was spared from having to ride the bus, we still all endured daily incidents of violence on the playground, lewdness in the school bathroom, and all kinds of nasty things when the teacher wasn't right there monitoring us. And I must confess that I was not always the victim. The things I said to my childhood friend Jessica Bird when we were in the fifth grade were cruel. I wanted to hang out with the cool girls and wasn't afraid to betray my good friend in order to be popular. I once tied the sleeves of Matt Tyson's sweatshirt together during science class, immobilizing and humiliating him in the process, just to get a laugh from the other kids. Indeed, I'm ashamed to say that I was sometimes the perpetrator of violence and cruelty even though my life was free from those lyrics and images that supposedly led to such behavior.

Now this isn't to say that I don't agree, at least in part, with Tipper and her do-good friends in high places. Though I'm far from supporting censorship, I agree that parents and other consumers have a right to know if a CD is full of foul language or inappropriate images. I think those warning labels—or to avoid any negative stereotyping that the word "warning" might elicit let's call them enlightenment labels—I think they're a good idea. But we would be fooling ourselves if we began to think that solving the problem of violence or sexual immorality or cruelty begins or ends with rating or labeling systems.

What we're really talking about is something much deeper than just lyrics or graphic images. What we're really dealing with is evil—the evil that is the foundation of violence, oppression, immorality, and intolerance. No label—no matter how big or brightly colored—can begin to protect children—or anyone else for that matter—from the evil that lays within humanity. For many legitimate artists, lyrics or images are merely an expression of the reality they see around them. And it's this reality that, even as sheltered as I was from lyrics and media images as a naïve rural kid without cable TV or popular music, I could not be saved. It is this reality, the reality of the inherent evil in human beings, that Jesus is discussing this morning.

At first this appears to be a Biblical lesson in personal hygiene, or if you're looking at it from Jesus' standpoint, the lack thereof. The Pharisees and other religious leaders are berating Jesus, calling him unfaithful and sinful, because he and his disciples have neglected to wash their hands before eating. It was part of Jewish purity laws at that time that one's hands must be washed before eating—and I for one think this is a very fine rule of thumb. But perhaps that's Jesus' point here—that though it may be a rule of thumb—these kinds of rules and regulations do not a

religion make. But for the Pharisees and other zealous religious leaders, the real bread and butter of what God wanted from them—namely to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God—these principles of religious life were being overlooked. And why—probably because this is the hardest stuff. What is much easier than doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God is getting all self-righteous and thinking that you’re all pious and holy because you washed your hands before you ate and someone else didn’t. And this is what Jesus is trying to set folks straight about. He explains that nothing evil is going to enter a body through whatever dirt and grime might be on one’s hands but rather that the real evil in humans comes from within—and no amount of hand washing can get rid of it.

And so it is that Jesus seems to be disagreeing with Tipper here. He recognizes a truth that so many other philosophers and artists have recognized as well—that human beings have as much potential to do harm as they do to do good—perhaps even more so since doing harm is often much easier and convenient than doing good.

So where does all this leave us? Many of us are likely to appreciate the arguments of those in Tipper’s camp—we’re tired of the violence, lewdness, cruelty, and oppression we see on TV and in movies and hear about in songs. But we also understand that our Lord and Savior has spoken the truth about humanity—that evil comes from within. We know that ridding society of the art that reflects reality isn’t likely to change reality, and yet we don’t know how else to do it. We all yearn to live in a world where evil has been obliterated but we don’t know how to be part of the change we wish to see.

And yet, perhaps we do. And that is why, in part, we’re all here this morning. We know that all is not right out there and that all is not right in here. And so we come here seeking the good, wishing to escape the evil. We come here to be with other folks wishing to do the same. And if that is truly the goal, we need to fess up and be honest with ourselves. We need to take a moment to think about how we are, through big and little choices we make each day, how we are contributing to the evil in this world. We need to consider how we’re letting the evil that is within override the good that I firmly believe is also inherent in each of us as well. Perhaps we’ve gone ahead and told that racist joke because our desire to get a laugh was more powerful than our desire to put an end to the evils of racism and degradation. Perhaps we’ve gone ahead and indulged ourselves once again when we know we haven’t done our fair share to end the evil of the unjust distribution of resources in this world. Perhaps we’ve gone ahead and labeled and judged another we don’t like just so we can get him or her out of our lives and be done with a relationship of which we’ve grown tired. To be honest with you, it’s hard for me to continue this list of “perhaps” because it’s hard for me to imagine this good and gentle group of folks doing evil. And yet surely none of us here are immune to human nature. But all of us here have dedicated ourselves to doing something about it, we all desire the eradication of evil and we know that, in some way, that begins with suppressing it within ourselves. And God knows we can’t do it alone.

(Walk to the table.)

And that’s why we’re here. And that’s why we pray. And that’s why we serve. And that’s why we love. Because we know, that when we do, the good we seek overcomes the evil we abhor.

Sure we can lobby for enlightenment labels, but we know that the change we wish in society is the change we must first elicit in ourselves. And so much of that change begins right here at this table—a table that reminds us that, in the end, good trumps evil, life trumps death, and God trumps all and when we eat of this bread and drink of this cup we, and the world in which we live, becomes just a little bit better for it, thanks be to God.