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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 17, Series B (Pentecost 14)
Saturday, August 28th, 2021
Sunday, August 29th, 2021

Sermon: Heart Hygiene – Part 2
Texts: Mark 7:14-23

Focus: The human heart is wicked and full of sin, making us spiritually unclean.

Function: The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all unrighteousness.

Structure: Text-Application

Locus: “I believe that Jesus Christ... has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person...” (SC, 2nd Article of Apostles’ Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. According to the experts, self-esteem is an essential part of personal wellbeing. Psychologists, teachers, and many pastors encourage us to think well of our selves. Unlike the Gen-Xers like me, who are beset by anxiety, the Millennials were raised with effusive affirmation. Participation trophies were the prizes of the day. It didn’t matter who won, as long as everybody tried and felt good about his or her part.

Yet from infancy not only Millennials, but also Gen X, have been spoon fed the New Age religion of Disney movies and pop psychology, whose primary doctrine is this: Believe in yourself. We generally assume that all people are “basically good.” The search for one’s inner

light or “god within” is a mainstay of Eastern religions like Hinduism and Buddhism. Yet even in Christianity, we have a tendency toward this saccharine soothsaying. The Quakers (Society of Friends) champion the search for the light within ourselves, and the medieval Scholastic theologians of Luther’s day encouraged their followers to “do what is in you.” Catholic theology teaches that people should do their best and let God do the rest. Unfortunately, for people with troubled consciences (like Martin Luther), doing “what is in you” is a scary prospect if you are full of sin—which we are. “If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!” (Matt. 6:23).

Lutheran and Reformed theology have a much baser view of humanity. Both speak either of the loss or the diminishing of God’s image in humanity ever since the Fall. In Luther’s famous and controversial book, *The Bondage of the Will*, he admonished Erasmus of Rotterdam for believing that human beings could cooperate in their salvation with God because the fleshly will and desires of fallen, sinful man are only to do what is evil—that is, until Christ comes into our hearts. Calvin spoke of humanity’s total depravity. And in one of our

mainstay liturgies, we confess that we are “poor, miserable sinners.” So much for self-esteem!

Jesus attests to the wickedness of the human heart in today’s Gospel. After a controversy with the scribes and Pharisees over various handwashing traditions, Jesus declares:

“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... For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person” (Mark 7:15, 21-23).

Jesus told his disciples that despite the prohibitions of Leviticus 11, there are, in fact, no clean or unclean foods. Foods cannot stain your soul, because food goes into your stomach and out into the toilet (vv. 18-19).

(Aside: Yes, in today’s Gospel, Jesus makes a potty joke by his

“passing” reference to poop. The literal translation of verse 19 is that “**it does not enter into his heart, but rather into the belly, and goes out into the latrine**”). “Thus he declared all foods clean,” invalidating a key part, not only of Jewish tradition, but of Mosaic Law.

But we're here to discuss *theology*, not *scatology*. Jesus tells us it's not handwashing or food that makes a person clean or unclean.

Externals don't matter. It's what's on the inside that counts. And what's inside the human heart is horrifying and evil (see the list above). We already know that Jesus declares anger to be the same as murder in God's eyes, and lust is on par with adultery (cf. Matt. 5:22, 28), because they both come from the same place: the darkness of the human heart.

“All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person” (Mark 7:23).

We are all poor, miserable sinners. We're full of sin with unclean hands, unclean hearts, and unclean lips (to borrow a line from Isaiah 6). God can allow nothing unclean in his presence. But we can't clean ourselves. We cannot improve ourselves. We have no inner light, no hidden spark, no scintilla of righteousness. We cannot come to God on our own, because we have the spiritual inertia of a rock. We cannot go to him, so he must come to us.

Only God can clean us up and make us holy. That is why David pleads in Psalm 51, “*Create* in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a

right spirit in me” (Ps. 51:10). David’s heart is *unclean* because of sin. So God must *create* a clean heart within him—and us. God must give us a *new* heart. In the words of Ezekiel, we need a spiritual heart transplant: “And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezek. 36:26; cf. 11:19). All of us sinners need better *heart* hygiene.

Let’s make David’s prayer personal: “Create in *me* a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit in *me*.” Our pleading prayer finds its answer in blood flowing from the hands, feet, and side of Jesus Christ. The Bible says, “The blood of Jesus... cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7). The blood of Jesus, poured out on the cross and poured out from the chalice in Holy Communion, removes our sin and makes us clean. And in the waters of Holy Baptism, we are washed and made new—born again—through water and the Word (John 3:3, 5). “He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior” (Tit.

3:5-6). God also purifies our hearts and cleanses our souls through the reading and preaching of his Holy Word. As Jesus told the disciples in the Upper Room: “Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you” (John 15:3).

The things that go *into* us cannot make us unclean: food, medicine, et cetera. But the things that go into us *can* make us *clean*: Christ’s Word and Sacraments. These things go into our mouths and ears and make us clean. By these means of grace, Jesus forgives our sins and washes us clean. Truly, the Lord’s Supper is the only food that *can* make us clean.

What we need is not more self-esteem. What we need is more *Christ-esteem*. Instead of trying to summon our own moral will or goodness or light, we look to the light of Christ and his Word, which now dwell within us. To him be the glory forever! Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of T the Holy Spirit. Amen.