

**INSIDE OUT**, a sermon in response to Mark 7:1-8, 14-15. 21-23 and James 1:17-27 by Rev. Scot McCachren at the First Presbyterian Church of East Hampton on September 2, 2018. (Originally formatted to assist oral presentation, including irregular punctuation.)

I did a lot of reminiscing this week. It all started when our older daughter Emily's job search had some promising developments after she preached for a PNC last Sunday – so Linda and I looked forward to her arrival here yesterday to tell us all about it. And, of course, being a dad, thinking about Emily with a church of her own, I kept remembering something that happened when she was about three years old. Linda and I had taught her about praying a short blessing before meals – and she took to the idea more quickly than we expected... We explained that she could use the pronoun “she” or “he” for God whenever she wanted to – or none at all. She liked that. So, one day it would be “God is great, God is good, let us thank HIM for our food...” then the next might be... “Let us thank HER for our food.” And, eventually, just “Let us thank GOD for our food.” +++ She just needed to decide which way was right for her that day. +++ This worked well,... but we did quickly learn that it was something Emily wanted to decide for herself each time. +++ She didn't need..., didn't want... – had no use for... – our input on the matter. +++ We learned to just listen quietly to her blessing, however she wanted to say it, and just join in for the AMEN at the end. +++ So far, so good... (we thought)...

Then Linda's parents came to visit. Now, lots of people have a tradition of saying the blessing *together* – so it's natural for folks to join in when you start,:: which Grandma did at lunch one day – very subtly just by quietly mouthing the words to herself... But that was more “help” than Emily wanted with *her* prayer... So... Here's how the prayer went that day: “God is great, God is good – **NOT YOU GRANDMA.**” +++ I think somehow, without realizing it, we had transitioned away from “prayer to thank and glorify God together” and into: “I decide how we do the blessing around here, and if you don't do it right – you're OUT.” +++ Needless to say, we had some more tweaking to do on what we were teaching about prayer... (((But don't worry – Emily still turned out OK – remember she was only 3 at the time.))) +++ +++ +++ **“Not you, Grandma...”** +++ +++ ... “This is *my* prayer.” +++ It was an honest moment of a child. But, isn't that really the way we all are? +++ My way is the best way – maybe the only way. +++ We hold on to our own way of looking at things – our traditions, our values, our beliefs – as though they were *divinely revealed* directly to us from the Almighty +++ and *then*, of course, we expect *everyone else* to fall in line and act accordingly. +++ We must be right, after all – we're US.

I know a time when I was guilty of it, myself. Let's move forward about a decade from our previous story (I *told* you,... I've been reminiscing). *Both* our daughters, Emily and Julia, went to a Presbyterian summer camp. They came back so excited about the prayers and songs they had learned and wanted to make one of them our new mealtime blessing. Here's how it goes – we all had to sing it together – “God is Good, God is Great, God he gave us chocolate cake. He's a righteous dude, He gave us food! Rub-a-dub-dub three men in a tub, thank you God for this great grub! Amen Amen Amen.”..... I didn't like it..... I never *told* them that. I went along with them and sang it,... but I didn't like it... at first.... But, as I saw how much they enjoyed it, I started asking myself some questions:: 1) Why didn't I like it? ... 2) Why didn't I tell them I didn't like it? ... and 3) What should I do about it?... +++ Well, once I really thought about it, the answer to the **first** question was easy. I didn't like it because I thought we were not being respectful of God to use such a silly prayer. But *why* wasn't it respectful? Because it was not how I had always done it... – It's not how MY parents taught ME to pray... +++ Well, that was not a good enough answer, and I *knew* it... ((I mean, they were KIDS. What did I want them to do – recite *High Mass in Latin*?)) +++ +++ This takes us to the **second** question – Why didn't I tell them I didn't like it? Well, honestly, it was because I couldn't think of a way to say it that didn't make me sound closed-minded and judgmental. +++ Then it hit me – of course – the reason I would sound closed-minded and judgmental was BECAUSE I was being closed-minded and judgmental. The problem wasn't the prayer – the problem was INTERNAL ... in ME:: +++ My kids wanted to praise God in song, and I was *resistant to the idea because I didn't think they were doing it right!!* +++ +++ So, that brings us to the **third** question: What should I do about it? After working through the first two questions, this one was obvious. +++ I needed to repent. +++ And, I needed to SING with my children.

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In our Gospel passage today, Jesus calls out the Pharisees for making this same mistake. They try to make Jesus look bad in front of the crowd by questioning why his disciples were eating without washing their hands. +++ Everyone washed their hands before eating – it was a tradition! It was what their parents had taught them to do, and their grandparents before them! ... That made it the **righteous** thing to do, didn't it? By letting his disciples eat with defiled hands, wasn't Jesus proving that he was a bad teacher? That he was out-of-step with Jewish tradition? That he was **bad**??!?+++ +++ The Pharisees sounded like a 3-year-old, insisting, "**I** decide how we do the blessing around here, and if you don't do it right – you're OUT."

Now, we know it's a good idea to wash your hands before eating – but I want to be clear about something. There is no law or commandment in the Old Testament that requires it. There are laws about *cleanliness*, ... about washing and isolating sick or defiled people, how to handle food, and what foods to avoid altogether... But there is no command from God to wash hands before *eating*. +++ So, the Pharisees are trying to discredit Jesus for ignoring a tradition created **by humans** – not by God... That is why in our reading, he calls them hypocrites who "abandon the commandment of **God**, and hold to **human** tradition." The Pharisees decided which rules to enforce based on their *own* selfish reasons.

When we create and enforce rules to serve *ourselves* and not to serve God, we obscure *God's* truth and substitute it with *our own*. We've seen this arise again and again in our own history... ::+++ When Martin Luther kicked off the Protestant Reformation by posting his 95 Thesis on the doors of All Saints Church, he charged the Catholic Church with selling indulgences and other official practices that served the church **but did not serve God**. +++ When slave owners attempted to justify the practice by twisting scripture for their own benefit. +++ And... when Christians categorize people by their differences, ... deciding who should be granted rights (((or sacraments))) and who will be denied based on our own notions of righteousness and sinfulness. +++ +++ **And Jesus says ENOUGH. STOP DOING THAT.**

If you want to talk about what DEFILES us – stop building up your legalistic traditions. Stop insisting that we follow **your** ideas of righteousness. That is all EXTERNAL. We need to look INSIDE OURSELVES +++ **at our own hearts**. +++ Let's look again at today's reading, when Jesus talks to the crowd about being defiled by not washing hands: "Listen to me, all of you, and understand; there is **NOTHING outside** a person that by going in can defile, but the things that **come out** are what defile. For it is **from within**, +++ from the human heart, +++ that evil intentions come... +++ "All these evil things come from within, and **they** defile a person." +++ +++ +++ It is not our ability to follow the rules that defines us, but what we do with our hearts. +++ +++ Well – that's sort of a **mixed blessing**, isn't it??? ... I mean, it's hard enough to keep up with all the laws, ... commandments, ... and church doctrine – but how **much harder** is it to truly transform our **hearts**? +++ And – come to think of it – where do we even start?

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Well – here's somewhere to start... Just as Mark names our own hearts as the **source of our faults, ...** today's reading from James shows us the other side of the coin. Yes, our hearts can defile us but **righteousness comes from the heart as well**. James tells us that when we become "**doers** of the Word, and not merely hearers," we "welcome... with meekness... **the IM-PLANTED word** ... that has the power to save our souls." (((REPEAT: when we become "doers of the Word, and not merely hearers," we "welcome, with meekness, **the implanted word** that has the power to save our souls."))) +++ And we have the perfect example of this in Jesus Christ, who obeyed God without question. He fed the hungry, ... healed the sick, ... comforted the outcast, ... and fought for justice. +++ Through James, Christ **calls us to follow** his example.: "Every generous act of giving, ... with every perfect gift, ... is from above, coming down from the **Father of lights**."

And so, **our righteousness is in our love** – our reflection of Christ. +++ It's not something on the **outside** that you need to let **in**. +++ It's already inside you. +++ **Christ... is... inside you**. +++ Christ is in how you respond to everyone around you – all of whom are the beloved children of God just as much as you are. +++ +++ So, when we catch ourselves judging, ... becoming angry, ... being selfish – we need to challenge ourselves by

asking:: “What is going on in my heart right now? If it’s anything other than love responding to the grace of Jesus Christ, **then I need to keep working on it.**”

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Before beginning my second-career journey through seminary and eventually here to East Hampton, I had the pleasure of spending sixteen years as a volunteer youth leader. During that time, and also since then, spending time with our youth here at First Presbyterian, I think I’ve seen teenagers at their worst and their best (and I think they’ve seen me at my worst and best as well). But a moment that I most cherish, +++ (and it is a moment I’ve witnessed over and over again), +++ happens every time the youth serve people in need.... It was especially true during weeklong summer mission trips, when the youth really have a chance to spend 5 days working hard for the same family – repairing their home. +++ ... It starts out as mostly just fun, +++ then they get to know the people they are working for, +++ they learn to care about them and become committed to serving them – to making their homes safer – dryer – warmer. +++ And then, +++ there’s a moment +++ when the youth **realize that Christ is among them +++ on the inside, working through them.** +++ The Good Shepherd has taken over their hearts and is tending his flock. +++ And in that moment, **they are righteous** +++ *from the Inside, ... Out.*

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The GOOD NEWS is that Christ meets us where our righteousness and our wickedness **both** reside:: +++ **In our hearts...** +++ That’s where he ***stirs*** us – that’s where he ***works*** on us – that’s where he ***talks*** to us – +++ +++ **from the Inside... Out.** And when we listen,+++ it’s in our **hearts** +++ faith and love +++ it’s in our **hearts** +++ that we are justified by his grace.

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In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.