

“What’s Inside?”

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Mark 7.1-8,14,15,21-23

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, ‘Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?’ He said to them, ‘Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

“This people honours me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.”

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.’

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, ‘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: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.’

Through the first part of this century, arguably one of the greatest athletes in the world has been the cyclist Lance Armstrong. Armstrong is a man who managed to win a record seven consecutive titles in the grueling Tour de France bicycle race. What made Armstrong’s achievements all the more amazing is that he did it after surviving a battle with cancer in the late 90’s. There certainly aren’t many people out there who haven’t seen those now famous yellow rubber bracelets, with “Live strong” imprinted on them. Besides his cycling victories, Armstrong used his victory against cancer to establish a foundation that inspires and supports so many others who battled the disease. For years, the words “Live Strong” have been synonymous with becoming a better, healthier human being.

But then over the past few years, Armstrong’s reputation has been called into question. There have been numerous accusations from fellow cyclists, and sporting authorities that Armstrong wasn’t playing fair. There was evidence that he had been blood doping and using human growth hormone to enhance his performance. It all came to a head last week when

Armstrong said he would no longer try to defend himself against the United States Anti-Doping Agency. Then the Agency then announced that it was stripping Armstrong of all his titles because he wasn't racing clean. In spite of all the good that Armstrong may have done with his Livestrong campaign, his reputation has now been tarnished. One wonders if it is possible to "live strong" yet at the same time "live clean?"

The Bible uses the language of clean and unclean all the time. During Jesus' day, the Pharisees...the moral authorities of the day were obsessed with what they referred to as ritual cleanliness, which to them had everything to do with one's being socially acceptable...with living strong. In today's gospel reading the Pharisees accuse Jesus and his disciples of being unclean because they do not wash their hands before eating together. In a time when people often ate out of the same dishes with their hands, I think one can imagine why this would be an issue. There isn't one of us here who would walk into a Subway and would want to see someone making our sandwich without those little plastic gloves on.

Yet in this reading from Mark's gospel, Jesus wants the Pharisees to think about what is clean and what is unclean in different terms. Jesus offers up one of his hard sayings identifying who is clean and who is unclean. Jesus' words on uncleanness pack a strong punch today. The strength of that punch is doubled because Jesus argues that because it's what's inside that makes us unclean, none of us, not one, can be deemed ritually clean. No matter how many times we step into the bath tub or out of the shower, no matter how many times we sanitize our hands and break out the Lysol. We all suffer from a similar kind of blight that affected the potato crops in Ireland during the great famine.

I never really understood the potato blight until a few summers ago when I dropped in on some friends who were bent over working away in the potato patch in their garden. I was curious as to why they were so busy with the potatoes, especially when it seemed kind of early for them to be harvesting them. What had happened, as it was explained to me was a case of phytophthora infestans. The same problem that caused the Great Potato Famine in Ireland from 1845-1849. The potato was the staple of the Irish diet. It provided carbohydrates and nutrition that helped Irish men, women and children live strong.

What I learned about the potato blight that day as I ended up helping my friends salvage their potato crop, is that the blight doesn't really effect the outward appearance of the potato. You could look at a blighted potato and think it was healthy and nutritious, ready to be wrapped in foil and baked to perfection. The vegetables appear large, firm, and hearty. But when one cuts open a blighted potato, the true story is revealed. The blight consumes the potato from the inside. The inner flesh of potato is a mushy, rotten, mess that stinks from the inside-out to about a centimeter of the skin.

This is exactly what Jesus is referring to when he talks about what it means to be unclean. Like the Pharisees and so many others, we may do our best to look our best, to eat right and exercise, but there is still this blight in our being that rots us from the inside out. So even if we look great on the outside, and even if we celebrate our victories and encourage others to "live strong" ,our hidden hungers and deep desires within are our true selves. We humans are still susceptible to weakness. As Paul the Apostle said "the good that I would I do not, and the evil that I would not I do."

You see, when Jesus said, "For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person." He wants us to look deeper with a critical eye...not at the outward appearance of ourselves or others. But he wants us to take a deeper look within. It's easy to focus on outward appearances. When you think about it that is how we judge most things in life. We do so quickly with an eye to what we see on the surface. Think about how often we can take a passing glance at a homeless beggar and make all sorts of assumptions about how that person ended up on the street and why they are in the situation they are in? Or maybe we have an eye towards someone who always has a smile on their face, who looks so fit and beautiful, someone who seems to "have it altogether" yet if only we were to look beneath the surface, we might be surprised at what we would or would not discover. It would take so much more work and so much more time to stop, maybe have a conversation and take a deeper look and judge more carefully or maybe discover in the end that we should not judge at all. As the Christian writer

and thinker A.W. Tozer once said, "A pharisee is hard on others and easy on himself, but a spiritual man is easy on others and hard on himself."

In a sense Jesus wants us to be hard on ourselves if we are to truly "live strong." Jesus serves to issue the Pharisees the truth that everyone is ritually unclean, standing in the need of grace and prayer. It really does call for a long hard look within ourselves in order that we might get beneath the surface and beyond the shell. This is something we are reminded of in Psalm 51 that says, "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me." We have to look within ourselves and discover if there is anything to behold.

Recently I was reading a reflection by the Dr. Leonard Sweet who was wrote about the first time he visited Disney World and his biggest disappointment when he got there. As many of us know, either from visiting Disney World or from watching The Wonderful World of Disney, the centerpiece of Disney World, its most familiar icon, is the beautiful Sleeping Beauty's Castle. Its tall towers, fluttering banners, imposing size, and fairy-tale perfection draw every child, and every child-like heart towards it.

But at Disney World, with all its technological wizardry and attention to detail, that centerpiece castle is a disappointment to first-time visitors. At least it was Leonard Sweet. He writes, "Far from being filled with magical nooks and crannies, secret staircases, vast ballrooms and airy balconies to gaze out at the rest of the "magic kingdom" Sleeping Beauty's Castle is empty. The castle is a hollow shell. The castle's function is simply to serve as a portal into the Magic Kingdom, which loses some of its magic as soon as it becomes apparent that the castle is nothing more than a glorified archway. The outward appearance is all deception. Sleeping Beauty's Castle has no heart of its own."

Finding a heart of our own, considering the matters of the heart...our own hearts...this is what Jesus was on about. Life is more than just following the rules. If we are to live strong then life is about being heart strong. Jesus offers us these words this morning because he wants to transform people from the inside out, not from the outside in. Whatever the hollowed out areas of your life, Jesus wants to fill them in with a Holy Spirit rooted in grace and forgiveness. Jesus comes with the gift of a new heart, a heart of faith, a heart of hope, a heart of love. This is the gift that will allow humans to "live strong." -To live with the strength of community, relationship

and fellowship. It's the strength that comes when we no longer point fingers but instead seek to join hands because in our weakness we discover our need for each other and discover that we're not that much different from each other.

Besides Lance Armstrong, the other Armstrong that made the news last week was of course Neil Armstrong. One of my favourite stories associated with Neil Armstrong and the Apollo 11 mission has to do with that famous quote of his when he said, "One small step for man...one giant leap for mankind." The words were actually prepared for Armstrong when he took his first step on the moon and really, they don't make sense because to say "one small step for man" would be the same as saying "one small step for mankind." In actual fact, and it's not sure if Armstrong skipped a word or if it was cut out by static, but he was supposed to have said, "one small step for a man...one giant leap for mankind."

My friends, that's what Christ's journey is for us. It is one small step for a man. And when we open our hearts to him and the Spirit he brings to our lives, this is one small step for you, for me...for a man, for a woman. Yet it is also a giant leap of faith and in that faith we have the heart of God that gives us the power to live strong together.