

**Brothers and Sisters, Grace to you and peace, from God our Father
and from our Lord and Saviors Jesus Christ... Amen**

After five weeks in the gospel of John, we're back in Mark, symbolized by the Lion, fast and powerful, and we'll continue to be in Mark until the end of November.

Our lesson for today is kind of a hard one. The Pharisees and scribes notice that the disciples aren't following tradition. Can you imagine, they're not washing their hands before they eat! To me it sounds like a good tradition... I'm not a stickler about it, but I remember asking the kids to wash their hands before supper. It's just good cleanliness. And good hand washing is very important during flu season. It seems to me that hand washing is a good thing!

Now, the issue in our reading is not so much about hand washing, as much as it has everything to do with righteous superiority. From the perspective of the Pharisees and the scribes, this failure to wash their hands is not only a matter of disrespecting tradition, but also disrespecting authority. They interpret this as disrespect for God.

And the reason they tell Jesus, is not so much because they are concerned about the health of the disciples, as much as it has everything to do with the fact that they feel morally superior. In other words, they're telling Jesus "we're more righteous than you are, na, na, na, na na..."

Ever been with someone from a different church, and they make you feel like they're better than you? Somehow, they're right and you're wrong? That's what going on here...

Jesus see's through this righteousness game, and calls them on it. In fact, Jesus connects this game of righteous superiority with evil intentions that come from the heart. Jesus seems to be saying, religion that focuses on criticism instead of love is evil; religion that focuses on judging others instead of caring for others is evil. I'll be honest, this is hard for me because I can be judgmental, I always need to be looking at myself in the mirror...

What I'd like to do this morning is reflect on judgment. What is it? How do we use it? How does it help us? How does it turn into evil?

Quick Story... I have a friend who is a pastor and took a new call in southern Iowa. He was invited to the ministerial association in his new town and was eager to meet everyone. His first meeting went unremarkably, he even volunteered to be a guest on a Christian radio station. People would call in with a problem and the pastor would talk with them and pray with them. My friend was eager to be involved in the community.

At the second meeting of the ministerial, even before they sat down, one of the other Pastors walked right up to him, and asked him what he thought about sin. Which is kind of a strange question to ask a Pastor, so my friend was a little wary... He commented about how sin separates us from God and because we are in bondage to sin, Jesus died on the cross to forgive us...

He didn't get any further, when the other pastor said, "no, we're not in bondage to sin, I haven't sinned yet today." Then my friend was disinvited from their fellowship and later disinvited to participate at the Christian radio station. He was mortified...

And now, even by my telling this story, do you see how superior I feel? Did you catch that? *Mea culpa*... Even in the pointing out how judgmental others are, we are being judgmental... Do you see how subtle this is? Can you see how blind we can be about our own use of judgment?

Another Story... On Facebook, I belong to a group of ELCA clergy. Pastors and Deacons from all across the country, in the same theological tradition. I think there's about 3-4 thousand participants. So, it's a big group.

This past week, one of the participants asked a simple question, "Where in the sanctuary do other people stand when they pray." Some people responded that they like to stand in the aisle, symbolizing being among the people. Others responded that they like to pray at the altar, symbolizing directing the prayers to God.

Others responded all over the place, some prayed at the lectern, one person even went to the balcony of all places... I like these kinds of conversations because you get a sense that there are as many ways to do something as there are congregations.

One person said, "According to proper liturgical practice, the celebrant is to stand sideways in the chancel area between the altar and the congregation." And then he couldn't help himself, he

said something to the effect that it was a dumb question. And oh my goodness, of course, a lot of people had things to say about his attitude, calling him the liturgical police, and so on... These little righteousness snafus seem to be happening a lot lately...

This righteousness game is a problem for us religious people. It's so tempting to hold our own views of righteousness as better than others. Remember when Lutherans couldn't date Catholics? I hope we're getting a little beyond that, but still the same thing...

Judgment is important. We all need good judgment every day, because every decision we make has consequences. And those consequences can be both good and bad.

Laws are very helpful for giving us a shared framework for making judgments and decisions. For instance, traffic laws are designed to move traffic along efficiently and to reduce accidents. If we obey the stop lights, and rules for lane changing and signaling, generally speaking, things go well for us. The likelihood of accidents decreases.

But, if we ignore the traffic laws, run stop signs, or drive drunk, well, bad things happen. We increase the likelihood of accidents, and people can die. Good judgment is absolutely necessary when driving. Of course, there are never any guarantees, we all know that someone can follow all the traffic laws perfectly and still have an accident. That's life...

The Ten Commandments are a little like traffic laws. If we follow them, generally speaking, things go well for us, and if we don't, bad things might happen. In this way the Ten Commandments are life giving, they give us a recipe for living and making decisions.

So, exercising good judgment in all life decisions is important. In our gospel reading, Jesus isn't advocating that we throw out traditions or good judgment; he seems to be expanding good judgment as it relates to the heart, in other words, loving God and loving the neighbor. In fact, a law that Jesus says encapsulates all the other laws.

Jesus says that it's what comes out of our mouth that defiles us... and these are all those judgmental comments. There is a higher righteousness than just following the law, and it has everything do to with the heart and how we use judgment, do we use our judgment to say words

of encouragement, support, and to care for others; or do we use judgment to criticize, ridicule, or demean others. Do you see the difference?

Jesus is very clear that it's what comes out of the mouth that defiles us... My mom used to say, "If you don't have anything good to say, don't say anything at all." And this is exactly what Luther is saying in his explanation of the 8th commandment, bearing false witness, "We are to interpret everything our neighbor does in the best possible light."

When Jesus talks about judgment, he says, "Judge not, lest yourself be judged," and "the judgment that you give is the judgment that you receive." In other words, what goes around comes around. It's this vicious cycle of sinning against one another, hurting one another and hurting back, and constant destruction...

Jesus seems to be suggesting that we use judgment differently. Judging to love... This is a higher form of righteousness. In other words, use judgment to be loving, kind, and gracious people.

This past week between our two churches, we went to valley fair, we all had a wonderful time having fun and getting to know one another. And I saw a lot of encouragement and support and caring for one another, kids and adults. I saw a lot of good judgment! Even though the rides were pretty scary!

The good news today is that this is what happens when God shows up; our hearts of stone are transformed into hearts of love and connection. And we become new creations. We become people who are loving, kind and gracious... And I believe it, because I've seen it.

Last Thursday, there were people putting kits together for WELCA, a Red Cross blood drive, and kids picking apples for the food shelf. This is called loving your neighbor, and leading by example... St Francis of Assisi is famous for saying, "Preach the Gospel at all times, if necessary, use words..." They will certainly know we are Christians by our love... And that's what we're doing... Amen...