

WORDS AND THE HEART

Mark 7:14-20 [MW18-27]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai & Wellsford, Sunday 02 September 2018

English comedian Sarah Millican says:

I find apologising for not having cleaned is easier than cleaning

In this morning's Gospel, Jesus talks about being clean and it seems logical – doesn't it?

- Jesus said there's nothing outside a person that by going into their bodies can make them “unclean”, cause them to be defiled rather it's the things that come out that are “unclean”, that pollute and poison
- Jesus went on to explain what we take for granted about how our bodies work food goes in through the mouth to the stomach and the body deals with it in the natural way

However, as if Jesus hadn't made enough enemies already ...

- it's just chapter 7 of a 16 chapter gospel and so far he's argued with the experts about various aspects of the traditional law showing the irrelevance of things like ritual handwashing highlighting how rigid adherence can lead to disobedience to the law of God
- but this particular teaching made Jesus a whole heap more enemies

Hard to grasp isn't it

- a simple biology lesson has people clamouring for Jesus' blood because it's not actually that simple
- according to many commentators Mark 7:14-20 is the most radical passage in the entire New Testament
- really? I mean, really???

Jesus declares:

It's not what goes into your body that defiles you; you are defiled by what comes from your heart (NLT)

In Jesus' day this was just not accepted

- even today in strictly orthodox Judaism this is not accepted Leviticus 11 has a long list of unclean animals that must not be used for food
- and it was life and death serious in one of those books we don't hear much about because it is in that sort of included part of scripture with the strange name of “The Apocrypha”
- in there, in the books of Macabees, there is the example of God's people being tortured and brutally killed because they would not eat even one tiny morsel of a food which was to them “unclean”

At one stroke, writes William Barclay, Jesus was wiping out the laws for which Jews had suffered and died. No wonder the disciples were amazed.

Jesus was saying that *things* cannot be clean or unclean

- only *people* can really be defiled and what defiles people is their own words and actions which are a product of their ... hearts
- defilement, uncleanness, pollution has nothing at all to do with what a person takes into their body through their mouth and everything to do with what comes out of their hearts

In the Contemporary English Version, in Mark 7:20, Jesus says:
What comes from your heart is what makes you unclean

Jesus then goes on to list a whole range of things

- which come from within, from the heart
- and which show bad behaviour and life well out of tune with God's call
- however I would like to focus just on the "heart"

earlier, in chapter 7 verse 6, Jesus recalls the words of the prophet Isaiah speaking on behalf of the Lord God

Here is the NIV:
These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me

and The Message:
These people make a big show of saying the right thing, but their heart isn't in it

It is not just a matter of saying some words, even the 'right' words

- it has to be real
- words and heart have to agree
- the words people say have to match what is in their hearts

If our heart is not right, it will show in our words

- if our heart is not right with God
- it won't be "fixed" by just changing the words
- you get right with God by having a change of heart
- when our hearts are in the right place
- this will be reflected in our words

I guess it begins with recognising how much God loves us

- being aware of the promise of life God has in store for us
- that God has a plan for each and every one of us
- and it's all made clear in Jesus

Another of my favourite writers, Max Lucado, writes in a similar vein in his book *A Gentle Thunder*. He is talking about labelling people, but it seems to me right in line with words and heart. See what you think ...

Recently we took our kids on a vacation to a historical city. While going on a tour through an old house, we followed a family from New York City. They didn't tell me they were from New York. They didn't have to. I could tell. They wore New York City clothes. Their teenager had one half of his head shaved and on the other half of his head, his hair hung past his shoulders. The daughter wore layered clothes and long beads. The mother looked like she'd raided her daughter's closet, and the dad's hair was down the back of his neck.

I had them all figured out. The kid was probably on drugs. The parents were going through a midlife crisis. They were rich and miserable and in need of counseling. Good thing I was nearby in case they wanted spiritual counsel.

After a few moments they introduced themselves. I was right; they were from New York City. But that is all I got right. When I told them my name, they were flabbergasted. "We can't believe it!" they said. "We've read your books. We use them in our Sunday school class in church. I tried to get over to hear you when you spoke in our area, but that was our family night and ..."

Sunday school? Church? Family night? Oh, boy. I'd made a mistake. A big mistake. I'd applied the label before examining the contents.

We've all used labels. We stick them on jars and manila folders so we'll know what's inside. We also stick them on people for the same reason.

John tells of a time the disciples applied a label. Jesus and his followers came upon a man who had been blind from birth. Here is the question the disciples asked Jesus: "Teacher, whose sin caused this man to be born blind—his own sin or his parents' sin?" (John 9:2).

Never mind that the man is a beggar in need of help. Never mind that the man has spent his life in a dark cave. Never mind that the man seated in front of them is in earshot of their voices. Let's talk about his sin.

How could they be so harsh? So insensitive? So . . . blind.

The answer? (You may not like it.) It's easier to talk about a person than to help a person. It's easier to debate homelessness than to be a friend to a street person. It's easier to discuss divorce than to help the divorced. It's easier to argue abortion than to support an orphanage. It's easier to complain about the welfare system than to help the poor.

It's easier to label than to love.

It's especially easy to talk theology. Such discussions make us feel righteous. Self-righteous.

As long as I'm confessing sins, I might as well confess another. We had such a theological discussion in Brazil. We missionaries debated whether we should offer Communion to people who are not members of our church. Our reasoning? What if they aren't faithful? What if they aren't truly converted? What if their hearts aren't right? If we offer them Communion, we could be leading them to eat the bread or drink of the cup in an unworthy manner. So we decided that first-time visitors could not partake.

We meant well. It sounded right. But I learned a lesson.

Guess what happened. That very week a friend told me he would like to visit the church. The same friend we had been inviting for weeks. The same friend who had shown no interest was suddenly interested. At first I was elated; then my heart sank. I told him he could come, but he couldn't partake of Communion.

As long as I live, I'll never forget the look on his face as he passed the Communion plate to the person next to him. He never returned. Who could blame him? We'd applied the label before we looked inside ... there is something wrong with applying the label before examining the contents.

"So, you're unemployed?" (Translation: Must be a layabout.)

"Hmm, you're an accountant?" (Translation: Must be dull.)

"She's an Anglican." (Translation: Must be liberal.)

"She's an Anglican who voted for the Greens." (Translation: Must be liberal beyond help.)

"Oh, I'm sorry; I didn't know you were a divorcee." (Translation: Must be immoral.)

"He's a fundamentalist." (Translation: Narrow-minded half-wit.)

Labels. A fellow gave me one the other day. We got into a lively discussion about some ethical issues. Somewhere in our conversation he asked me what kind of work I was in. I told him I was minister, and he said, "Oh, I see," and grew silent.

I wanted to say, "No, you don't. Don't you put me in that box. I'm not a minister. I am Max-who-ministers. Don't you put me in that box with all those hucksters and hypocrites you may know. That's not fair."

Labels. So convenient. Stick them on a person, and you know what pantry to use.

What if God did that with us? What if God judged us by our outward appearance? What if he judged us based on where we grew up? Or what we do for a living? Or the mistakes we made when we were young? He wouldn't do that, would he?

Be careful when you judge. That doesn't mean we shouldn't discern. That does mean we shouldn't pass the verdict. The amount of grace you give is the amount you get.

Jesus had another view of the man born blind. Rather than see him as an opportunity for discussion, he saw him as an opportunity for God. Why was he blind? "So God's power could be shown in him" (John 9:3).

What a perspective! The man wasn't a victim of fate; he was a miracle waiting to happen. Jesus didn't label him. He helped him. Jesus was more concerned about the future than the past.

Let's be bluntly honest: we've all done it. We've judged. We've labeled. We've slammed the gavel and proclaimed the guilt before knowing the facts. We need to go back to John 9:4 and understand what the work of God is: "While it is daytime we must continue doing the work of the One who sent me."

What is the work of God? Accepting people. Loving before judging. Caring before condemning.

Look before you label.

Or, we might say, look to your heart before you speak ...

- ... for the words of our mouths reflect the state of our hearts
- in Jesus, God has given us the ability to have a new heart to have our hearts transformed, revived, renewed
- in Jesus, God spoke the words of life: compassion, grace, welcome, forgiveness, acceptance, mercy, love
- this is what has been, is being, will be poured into our hearts

The words of our mouths reflect the state of our hearts

This coming week I encourage you to make a conscious effort

- to see that your words and your hearts are on the same page the page that Jesus turns us to focus on making what comes out of your mouths life-giving
- to do this you need to pay attention to what your heart is being filled with make sure your heart is being filled with good things
- make the effort to spend time in prayer to have a quiet time of reflection in God's presence to read the scriptures and meditate upon what you read

There are some practical suggestions in the "Wayne's Word" for this week

- look for things to celebrate and praise if you have to say some hard or difficult words remember to balance this with some positive things
- and the last line says:
*our words, from the heart of Jesus in our hearts,
bring healing and hope that the world and the people around us sorely need*