

## THE BODY OF CHRIST

### Mark 7:14-23

Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.” After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. “Are you so dull?” he asked. “Don’t you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? For it doesn’t go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body.” (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.) He went on: “What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.”

### Ephesians 6:10-12

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

### MESSAGE:

Why do people do the things they do? What makes them tick? Why does one man become a philanthropist and another become a serial killer? Why is one person cheerful and optimistic and another gloomy and pessimistic? For centuries philosophers and scientists have been coming up with theories about what causes people to behave in certain ways.

In the modern age the theories have tended to fall into two opposing camps which have come to be called “heredity versus environment” or “nature versus nurture.” According to heredity or nature theories, along with our physical bodies our personalities and our behavior are primarily determined by the genetic makeup we inherited from our parents. According to environment or nurture theories, we are products of external forces that act upon us after we are born—our parents, society, economic circumstances and so forth.

Nowadays, most psychologists and social scientists believe that the truth lies somewhere in between. We genetically inherit, much of what we are, but the environment we grow up in plays an important role in shaping us as well. One thing the two theories have in common and makes them appealing is that they allow us to believe that what we are and what we do are the result of things that are beyond our control.

We didn’t pick our parents and we didn’t choose our environment and that kind of lets us off the hook in regard to taking responsibility for what we are and what we do. Instead of assuming responsibility for what we do, we can blame our genes or our parents or our teachers or the economic situation into which we were born—or whatever. I was just made this way so don’t blame me! Even though each one of us knows, deep down, that

we *are* responsible for what we do, it's tempting to tell ourselves that someone or something else is to blame. We'd rather be *victims* than *villains*.

Our Lord takes that excuse away from us in today's Gospel lesson. He clearly states that WE and no one else are responsible for what we do.

*"Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.' For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man unclean."*

The world doesn't make us evil; we make the world evil. Sin isn't something we get infected by—like rabies or AIDS; it's something WE infect the world with. As the great 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher, Pogo the Possum, once said: *"We have met the enemy and he is us."*

This wisdom of our Lord destroys the secular wisdom of our time, which calls evil behavior "dysfunctional" rather than "sinful" and argues that its causes are to a significant extent beyond a person's control. You don't tend to see words like "evil" or "bad" or "sinful" applied to wrongdoers anymore; instead, they are characterized as "challenged" or "pathological" or "sick." They suffer from psychological disorders rather than willfully perpetrate evil. But the wisdom of God is higher than the wisdom of man and if our Lord has told us that we ARE responsible for what we do, we had better believe it.

But if we *are* the problem, what is the solution? If the source of the darkness lies within us how do we let the light in?

Christians wrestle with this problem all the time. We want to lead a life pleasing to God, but we find ourselves helpless before the power of our sinful natures. We rejoice that our sins are forgiven, but we can't stop sinning. We have good intentions, but we continue to do the things Jesus denounces: we have evil thoughts, we are sexually immoral in thought and word if not in deed; we are greedy, malicious, deceitful, envious, gossipy, arrogant and foolish. **And we would desperately like to find a way to stop being that way but it just doesn't seem as if we can.** We know that we can't just "go along" with our sins, but we're sick and tired of feeling guilty.

Well, first of all the Bible makes it clear that our struggle with sin is not a matter of human warfare, but of spiritual warfare. "Our struggle," Paul writes, *"...is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."* The darkness in our souls is not psychological darkness or even moral darkness—it is spiritual darkness and that is why, in our flesh, we are powerless before it. As we say of the devil in one of our favorite Lutheran hymns: *"...his craft and power are great, and armed with cruel hate, no one on earth his equal."*

What we need is to let the light of Christ shine into the pools of darkness that collect in our souls. But where do we find this "Christ-light" and apply it to the dark corners of our lives, day by day? One excellent place to look for it is in the church, which the Scriptures

call “the body of Christ in this world.” The light of Christ comes to us in the church in many ways—through God’s Word, through worship, through communion and through prayer, but also through our brothers and sisters in Christ. The church—the body of Christ in this world—is a spiritual community.

Living in that community is not just about “me and Jesus,” it’s about Jesus IN and AMONG us. God called His first church, the people of Israel, His covenant community. Isaiah tells us that God rejoiced over his community as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride. During His earthly ministry, Jesus gathered His disciples together time and time again to speak to them collectively. When the Holy Spirit blazed into the world at Pentecost, He formed the Apostles into a church—a church which spread like wildfire through Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

One of the most notable features of the early church was how much its members loved and cared for each other as a community. The early Roman historian Tertullian quoted the heathen as saying about Christians: “*See how they love one another!*” Many people in those days were drawn to Christ by the fervent love that Christians showed for one another.

There are two kinds of community in this world: Christian community and secular community. In Christian community—the Church—Christ is present among us and people can relate to one another THROUGH their faith in Him. Their relationships are blessed by faith, love, joy, hope and forgiveness, along with the knowledge that those relationships will endure throughout eternity.

In secular communities, where we are not gathered together in the Name of Christ, we are left to relate to one another apart from these blessings. As a result, it is very easy for these communities to end up as what the author Tom Wolfe called “bonfires of vanities”—each member struggling to feed his ego, work his agenda and have his way—however subtly or cleverly or even unconsciously he may go about doing so. Ever spend an evening with another couple and then spend the ride home musing on their shortcomings? “It’s great to see you! How lovely you look! (Was that ever boring. Boy, has she aged!)” That’s a bonfire of vanities. And even if we have the self-control not to express such thoughts out loud, we think them and then congratulate ourselves for having the self-discipline not to speak them. We can even find virtue in our sins! Come on folks, let’s face it! Every one of us carries around a bonfire of vanities in our hearts!

Our motives are vain, our thoughts are sometimes unconscionable, we say things we shouldn’t say and do things we shouldn’t do. If you doubt that, compare your thoughts and words and actions to the standard God has set for us in the Ten Commandments. Morally, each and every one of us is a trainwreck. We need help. We need Christ. And Christ comes to us through each other: “*For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.*”

When Paul called the church “the Body of Christ” he compared us as individuals to members of that body. Some of us are the brains, some the hands, some the eyes, some the ears. I figure I’m the mouth, since that’s always been the most active organ in my body. Doesn’t seem to change with age, either. But the parts of a body need each other.

They are helped by each other, nourished by each other, depend on each other and are sustained by each other.

IT IS THROUGH EACH OTHER THAT WE TANGIBLY RECEIVE JESUS CHRIST INTO OUR LIVES. All the fruits of faith in Jesus Christ which the Holy Spirit extends to us--love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control—all these come to us through each other.

Of course the devil is very good at hindering us from becoming an active part of Christian community. He persuades us that we can be more comfortable in solitude. Our social motto becomes: nothing ventured, nothing lost. No hurt feelings, no embarrassing gaffes, no obligations, no betrayals, no admonishment, no nothing. Just our chair, our book, our TV, our computer, our stereo. No people to mess things up: just peace and quiet. But that which we call “peace and quiet” is far from either.

As Luther said, sin turns us in on ourselves, while love—which is the opposite of sin—turns us toward each other. Love is an outward journey, not an inward journey. It has little to do with introspection, and everything to do with relationships. Love is not self-serving, it is self-denying.

There is an abundant life to be had in Christian community and it is as far superior to other ways of living as the heavens are far above the earth. It is a life of bringing Christ to each other in the fellowship of the church. It is offering ourselves up as yeast to leaven the loaf; immersing ourselves in the love of the brethren. Enjoying not only Christ IN us, but Christ AMONG us as well.

Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is not such that you can say here it is or there it is, for the kingdom of God is IN and AMONG you.” Alone, at our best we are like the Pharisees: whitewashed tombs who have nice, clean appearances, but are moldering on the inside. Together, celebrating Christ among us, we are a living, breathing body, being renewed in faith and hope and love through each other.

Amen.