

SERMON SERIES: "Jesus and Health"
SERMON TITLE: #5—"Jesus and Spiritual Health"
SERMON TEXT: Mark 7:1-23
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: August 30, 2015, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

As most of you know, I've been preaching a series of sermons all through this month of August. We've been taking a close look at the Gospel of Mark, chapters 5-7, and considering how Jesus promoted mental health, physical health, relational health, and societal health. Interested in the progression of this series, a few days ago my husband Steve asked me, "What kind of health will Jesus be promoting this week?" When I told him, "spiritual health," Steve protested, "But they've all been 'spiritual.'" Yes, they have. Having access to mental health is a spiritual value. Having access to physical health is a spiritual value. Developing relational health is a spiritual value. And knowing and doing what it takes to create societal health is a spiritual value. Sometimes, though, we also have to focus particularly on spiritual health in order to have the inner strength to do all the rest. It's like what my doctor told me when I complained about back pain. He said, "Kim, you've got to strengthen your core muscles. When your core is strong, your back is less likely to get injured, and the whole rest of your body will be more healthy."

OK, then. Today's task is to think about our core. Let's dig into Mark 7 and see what we can learn from Jesus about spiritual health.

1—TO WASH OR NOT TO WASH?

To wash or not to wash, that is the question that arises first in these verses. The Pharisees and scribes obviously thought their ritual handwashing was a highly spiritual act, and they didn't understand why some of Jesus' disciples didn't observe this spiritual practice before eating. This thorough washing of hands was a tradition passed down from the Jewish elders, so it seemed to the Pharisees and scribes

to be a required aspect of their Jewish faith. How could a person be spiritual and not do this? After all, isn't cleanliness next to godliness?

If you're like me, your immediate impulse might be to side with the Pharisees and scribes on this matter. What parents haven't told their kids a million times to wash their hands before they eat? We've certainly all seen the signs posted in restrooms reminding restaurant workers and the public to wash our hands thoroughly after doing our business. Today we know that all kinds of bacteria, viruses, and diseases are spread by dirty hands. So, to us, it's a little surprising that Jesus the healer didn't jump on the sanitation band wagon with these Jewish leaders. A lot of sick people could be healed by practicing better hygiene. In verses 14-19, Jesus said that what goes into the body is not the defiling factor, but rather what comes out of the body. Well, as one who has experienced both the Nicaraguan and Colombian versions of Montezuma's revenge, I can attest that cleaner hands, cleaner pots and pans, cleaner food, and especially cleaner water, produce a lot less defilement and a whole lot more physical health.

So, being a person who likes cleanliness, I take some comfort in a close reading of verse 2. There, we notice that *some of Jesus' disciples* were eating with unwashed hands. By default, we could deduce that Jesus himself and *some others* of his disciples probably did practice the Jewish ritual of washing before they ate. Phew! Thank goodness! Handwashing might still be OK.

2—QUESTION OUR HUMAN TRADITIONS

But if cleanliness is a good thing, then why didn't Jesus just agree with the Pharisees and Scribes and tell his unclean disciples to go wash up? Maybe because, as all my commentaries indicate, the Pharisees and scribes had taken their washing to an extreme in which they valued the ritual more than the purpose. There's a nuance here. They weren't washing their hands to be physically healthy; they were washing because they thought the key to spiritual health was following certain rules set in place by their elders.

That reminds me of the story of the Easter ham. The story goes that there was a family tradition in which, generation after generation, the women of the family prepared the Easter ham exactly the same way. Whatever size ham they brought home from the store, they cut an inch off the length before putting the ham in the pan to bake. Great grandma did it, grandma did it, mom did it, and finally the daughter did it. But one Easter, the daughter invited her great grandmother to come into the kitchen and chat while she was preparing the ham for the oven. When the great grandmother saw what her great granddaughter was doing, she asked, "Honey, why are you cutting off the end of the ham?"

Puzzled, the great granddaughter protested, "You should know that, Great Grandma. It's our family tradition, so we'll have the perfect tasting Easter ham, just like you always prepared. You taught Grandma to do that, and she taught my mother, and Mom taught me. All these years, we've been following your Easter ham tradition."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed the great grandmother. I never meant for that to be a tradition! I only cut an inch off the ham because my pan was too small!"

While following a tradition may sometimes be good practice, other times it may no longer be necessary, and sometimes those traditions may actually cause harm. Think, for example, of the confederate flag that was recently removed from the South Carolina state capitol. More important than blind obedience and repetition of a practice is knowing why the tradition got started. If we know the purpose of a tradition, then we aren't following the rules mindlessly just for the sake of the rules. Then we can decide if the tradition is still meaningful, if it still serves a good purpose, or if there might be a better way to accomplish our goals in a new time and place.

Missionaries often have had to think about tradition this way. Just because a spiritual practice helped people draw close to God in Europe or North America wasn't any guarantee that that same ritual would be meaningful in Africa, South America, or Asia. We also have to consider this truth between generations. For example, just because a certain type of music has been a rich part of Christian worship

for several hundred years doesn't mean that worship always has to include that same type of music. Maybe, for a younger generation, new sounds and worship styles would convey the gospel in a more effective manner. Maybe, for a younger generation, there is a more heartfelt way to connect with and worship God. Jesus obviously believed there are some basic commandments of God that are non-negotiable. But Jesus also teaches us that, to have spiritual health, we must be willing to question our human traditions.

3—CLEAN UP OUR HEARTS

Another point Jesus makes in this passage is that, to have spiritual health, we must clean up our hearts. As bad as sickness of the digestive track might be, sickness of the soul is a lot worse. While washing our hands can be helpful to our physical health, the focus of our hearts is what determines our spiritual well-being.

During and after his encounter with the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus named a number of symptoms of spiritual sickness. In verse 6, quoting from the Prophet Isaiah, Jesus made it clear that disease of the spirit occurs when the people honor God with their lips but their hearts are far from God's will and purpose. In verses 9-12, Jesus berated the Pharisees and scribes for neglecting the care of their elderly parents. And, in verses 21-22, Jesus spoke about the evil intentions of the heart which, in turn, produce sexual sins, thefts, murders, unfaithfulness to spouse, greed, wickedness, deceit, unrestrained immorality, envy, insults, arrogance, and foolishness. Those symptoms of spiritual illness hurt the individual, and they also wound and destroy other people. Jesus called the Jewish leaders "hypocrites" because, even as they so piously washed their hands and taught others to do likewise, their hearts were still contaminated with sin.

Obviously, this was no new problem. Besides Isaiah, the prophet Jeremiah had also written about heart and soul sickness. Jeremiah had asked, "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?" (8:22). Two millennia later, the

Afro-American spiritual answered back, “There *is* a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole; there *is* a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.” Christians believe that that that b-a-l-m balm, or “salve,” or “salvation” is possible through the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ. While the Pharisees and scribes came out to Jesus and his disciples in judgment, looking for what was wrong and trying to bully them back to the less-than-adequate traditions of the elders, Jesus was already there offering powerful healing to the masses. Through Jesus, people were receiving mental health, physical health, relational health, and societal health. And now, in the confrontations with the spiritual leaders from Jerusalem, it was becoming more and more obvious that the people would be receiving their spiritual health from Jesus as well.

According to Jesus, it wasn’t washing hands in traditional rituals that was going to heal the people of their spiritual sickness. What they needed was a heartfelt way to connect with God, so their worship wouldn’t be in vain, so their hearts wouldn’t be far away from God, so they would have respect for their fathers and mothers, and so they wouldn’t have evil intentions toward others. Essentially, Jesus was saying that whether we practice traditional rituals or brand new ones, what’s important is that our hearts are connecting with God in a way that is meaningful and alive. That’s when we’ll be clean not only on the outside, but also on the inside. That’s when we’ll be germ-free not only on our hands but also in our hearts. When our hearts are purified by a direct, personal, and powerful relationship with God, that’s when we will have spiritual health.

CONCLUSION

When I was pastor of the Wesley United Methodist Church in Pueblo, Colorado, a woman named Shirley started attending and joined the church. Shirley was a very faithful attendee and soon was serving in a number of leadership roles. But Shirley told me early on that she would occasionally miss worship on purpose. She said she would do this to remind herself that she wasn’t rule bound to attend. Then, when she came back the following Sundays, she would rejoice that she was there because

she wanted to be there. She was there to connect her spirit with God, willingly and joyfully—not because she was obeying some traditional law, but because church was a place where Shirley experienced the grace and love of Christ. Church was a place where the healer Jesus offered Shirley spiritual health.

As we come to the end of this sermon and the end of this sermon series, I encourage you to receive the healing power of Jesus in your spirit. Open your heart today and allow Jesus to do his healing work. Let Jesus clean up your heart and set you on the path of spiritual health.