

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
September 2, 2018

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

When I read this passage there is a song that quickly comes to my mind.

Through the voice of Michael Jackson these words sing out in my head:

I'm starting with the man in the mirror
I'm asking him to change his ways
And no message could have been any clearer
If you want to make the world a better place
Take a look at yourself, and then make a change.

In this song, Mr. Jackson, the author, or simply some fictional character who is the “I” of the song in the verses prior to and following the chorus above is observing the dire straits others are in such as “kids in the streets with not enough to eat” or “some with no home, not a nickel to loan.” As he sees these realities of so many people in the world his desire is to make a change and for once in his life do something good.

I think each of us come today and can relate to this sentiment. As people of faith, we strive to make a difference in the world and I believe we are in fact doing that through so many ways. Such as your continued dedication and commitment each month to fill up the bins downstairs that in turn fill up the shelves in our local food pantry that helps many in our community who are food

insecure. Or the quilts that are so lovingly sown each Tuesday that help so many: children at UIHC, families who stay at the Ronald McDonald House, an abused woman living in pain and fear whose only place of safe refuge is the domestic violence shelter in Iowa City, or an aging soul who lives in the nursing home and feels alone. These are just some of the places those quilts have been delivered. Or the wonderful monetary gifts we steward that go to places such as Free Indeed Prison ministry, Lutheran Chaplaincy Outreach at UIHC, hunger causes such as Operation Backpack or the special offering taken at our most recent Synod assembly and so many others. Make no mistake about it we are doing good stuff and good does flow forth from the human heart.

Yet, Jesus' words spoken in our gospel passage and the chorus Michael Jackson sings so often hit home. Hard. Painfully. It starts from within. When we see pain in the world. Kids in the street with no food to eat. Folks without a home, no nickel to loan. It's quick to point a finger and make an assumption such as they are lazy or simply living off the government. They ought to roll up their sleeves and dig themselves out of their own hole they have made for themselves; when, truth be told the facts may state otherwise such as they were laid off due to the mishandling and greed of corporate executives. Or, a family member became gravely ill and insurmountable health care costs left them with a choice between

spending their income on life-saving medication and needed healthcare or the mortgage, car payment, or even food. We make an assumption such as a student whose grades are slipping, fails to submit homework, receives detention and skips out that she too is lazy, doesn't care, has no work ethic or initiative; when, in reality the fact is she walks across town to work an 8 hour shift at minimum wage and then walks home in the midst of darkness as the clock turns to a new day in order to provide funds for the families housing or to cover those medical costs of a sick parent or sibling.

So often we quickly jump to a conclusion about someone. They need to change. When in all reality, it is we who need to change. Look deep within ourselves and realize we made a false assumption. We let deep seeded biases cloud our judgement. When someone doesn't dress like us – maybe comes to church in clothes we think less than appropriate such as tattered jeans or tennis shoes with holes or a skirt just a bit too short and we scoff, cast a look of disapproval their way, or whisper a comment to our neighbor is it really that person who needs to change or is it our way of trying to make that person conform to our image – be like us that needs to change.

Jesus does in fact speak the hard truth of life in the flesh. So often we want to look elsewhere for the troubles in our lives and in our world. Our first response

is so often to point the finger or to cover up our brokenness by making ourselves out to be holier than another; when, in reality we all come to the Table of our Lord in need of healing, forgiveness, redemption, and grace. Jesus never condemns the practice of ritual cleanliness in our text. It's easy to make the assumption and point the finger at the Pharisees and scribes but to do is to miss the entire point of the passage. Eleven times in verses 7-23 of the 7th chapter is the Greek word translated as "human being" or "person" used. Repetition like that in such a short span of verses is clearly intentional to lift up a theme and what Jesus is getting at is before we look outside we need to look inside.

For me, this passage truly causes me to do some soul searching. How am I a part of the child in the street with no food to eat? The abundance of food I throw out each month because it goes uneaten or passes its expiration date. The companies I support that fail to pay adequate wages to their employees. The false assumptions I make about a person at the checkout line buying a candy bar with STAMP dollars (i.e., food stamps). Is their child not also allowed, like mine, to have a sweet treat occasionally? My own selfishness and greed at buying more than I need.

This is a painful text directed at me. At us. At all of humanity. But Jesus often doesn't mince words and they do hit home. Yet, amid this, I am reminded of

and I cling to the grace of God offered freely through the One who speaks these words. Humanity is broken. I am broken, and I need help. I can't do it alone. I need the grace of God. I need that Bread of Life to help change my ailing heart. I need that cup of wine and the words of life that come with it, "This is my blood shed for you." Yes, this passage calls us to look inside; yet, we know our help, our salvation, the healing balm of forgiveness and new life comes from outside in the God who breathed new life into us, who cleanses us from all sin in the waters of baptism, and when we look in the mirror and see where we have erred, turned from God, turned from our neighbor, contributed to the systems that promote injustices, racism, bigotry, failed to stand up for the victimized and marginalized, we also see a precious and beloved child of God, washed in grace, fed with the Bread of Life, marked with the cross of Christ, and sent forth yet again with a clean heart full of Christ's love to do God's work.