

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23  
August 29, 2021

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

Friday night, our beloved Bears along with schools around the state kicked off another season of high school football. Yesterday marked the start of college football with several teams in action. It's that season again and it's probably time for me to watch one of my favorite sports movies of all times, Rudy. The movie is based on the life of Rudy Ruettiger and his dream to play football at the University of Notre Dame. The only problem is, which is rather obvious from the onset of the movie and then succinctly stated to Rudy later by the character Fortune, groundskeeper at Notre Dame's football season, "You're 5 foot nothin', 100 and nothin', and you have barely a speck of athletic ability." At this point in the movie, when that line is spoken, Rudy has encountered many "gut-check" moments in life that easily could have derailed his dream. Yet, through much determination, hard-work, and soul searching, he does finally get accepted to Notre Dame and somewhat miraculously lands a spot on the practice squad of the football team. When Fortune utters these words, Rudy has made his decision to quit the team seeing all his hard work seem to be for nothing as the chances of a practice squad player suiting up and playing in a game are slim to none. Fortune reminds Rudy, even despite his physical limitations, "You hung in there with the best college football players in the land for 2 years. ... Now go on back." Rudy is at one of those "gut-check" moments, quit or go back.

Jesus seems to present us with a "heart-check" moment. LaDonna Sanders Nkosi points out that Jesus calls us to take a deep look within to check what lies in the recesses of our hearts, what it is that is coming out of us, what are we saying, who we are as a people in Jesus' sight.<sup>i</sup> A "heart-check" isn't an easy thing to do.

Take this passage for instance. There is an all-too easy trap we can fall into. A simple way to steer clear of a "heart-check" and that's to point the finger at these religious leaders who come to Jesus. They're in the wrong. They don't get it. They need the "heart-check". They're the hypocrites and religious pretenders

seemingly going through the motions and not letting their hearts be filled with the living God.

Take a “heart-check” Jesus call us back to. Deep within your own well. What’s the water look like? The heart in Jesus’ time was more than just the muscle pumping blood through one’s body. It was the locus of all one is. The center of all emotion, thought, rationale and reasoning. It was the core of life within humanity. So, Jesus isn’t calling us to see the doctor for an annual physical. Rather, he is really inviting us to take a close look at whole selves.

I use the word invitation, which perhaps some might find odd. There are some invitations we might not always wish to have received; however, I find most invitations are welcome ones even if we may not accept them or have other commitments. Invitations have a way of making us feel welcome, appreciated, loved, and important. Many are an opportunity to attend an event that is joyful, exciting, and perhaps even transformative.

If this is an invitation Jesus calls us to, it may seem less than desirable. It’s a practice that can be downright excruciating. Jesus’ invitation to follow him was one that would ever be free of pain. His invitation to follow leads to the cross of agony. Yet, his invitation to follow always leads to the opportunity to feast on the bread of life. His call to be a disciple always leads to the healing balm of Gilead, which is none other than the one who invites and calls. Jesus’ invitation always leads us away from that which defiles and toward that which makes new and clean our hardened hearts.

Jesus’s invitation to look within ourselves indeed is an opportunity for healing. It’s an open door into transformation. It’s an invitation to let Jesus enter the judgement we might harbor. The hatred that might clog our ability to love. The words we may spew that might strip another of their true humanity.

We talk about spiritual practices, Jesus’ invitation to acknowledge our brokenness and not point the blame elsewhere creates an open window for the cooling breeze of the Spirit to enter in. It opens a valve to let the stale, filthy water out

and the water of life in. It's a practice, a discipline, we call "Confession and Forgiveness".

Practice always leads to something. There is a desired outcome. Thinking about a spiritual practice the desired outcome it seems is a closer connection to God. A changed heart made ever true in the endless mercies, unconditional love, and abundant grace of God.

Practice is often not easy. It can be tiring, painful, and at times seem futile. Sometimes we may not put our all into practice. It's often so repetitive that it seems we're just going through the motions. That's a bit at what Jesus is hinting out. If we just go through the motions of confessing our sins and hearing the words of absolution with little thought, then why do it. We're missing the mark.

Yet, Jesus' invitation to a "heart-check", to acknowledge and confess the evil intentions that lurk within each of us, to truly and sincerely do that will lead to an encounter with the forgiveness offered by Christ. Resurrection dawn becomes reality casting aside the darkness from those recesses within. Joy of Easter morning is made new each day.

The spiritual sickness humanity harbors always begin within. The healing touch we yearn always comes from outside of us. The good news is we have access to that wellspring of life. The invitation to a "heart-check" is an invitation to let Jesus enter, change, transform and send us out with clean hearts, loving hearts, good hearts, forgiving hearts, grace-filled hearts that reflect the goodness of God and the light of Christ. That's who we are called and sent to be as the people of God.

---

<sup>i</sup> LaDonna Sanders Nkosi; "September 2, Ordinary 22b Living by the Word" christiancentury.org.