

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

August 29, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year B, Proper 17: Deuteronomy 4:1–9; Psalm 15; Ephesians 6:10–20; Mark 7:1–8, 14–23*

Today we heard most, but not all, of the seventh chapter of Mark’s gospel. Jesus is in Galilee. He and his disciples have crossed the sea to Gennesaret. Mark writes, “And when they got out of the boat, immediately the people recognized him, and ran about the whole neighborhood and began to bring sick people on their pallets to any place where they heard he was.”¹ Yet all was not well. A group of Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem was waiting for him. Jesus had little patience for their concerns for ritual purity.

After speaking to them, he turned to the crowds and said, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: There is nothing from outside a person which, when it goes into the person, is able to defile him [or her]; but the things that come out of the person are the ones that defile the person.”²

Away from the crowds in a house with his disciples, Jesus says, “From the heart of human beings, the evil thoughts come out: sexual sins, robberies, murders, adulteries, actions motivated by greed, wicked actions; deceit, indecency, [envy],³ abusive speech, arrogance, foolishness. All these evil things come out from within and defile the person.”⁴

In *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, we learn that in the Old and New Testaments, the heart is “the main organ of psychic and spiritual life, the place in [humans] at which God bears witness to Himself.”⁵

I think it’s fair to say that the worldview of our time is very different. I associate my heart with affection, love, and good, though I know that heartache can lead to sin. My

¹ Mark 6:54–55.

² Mark 7:14–15. Translation: Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, Anchor Bible 27 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 400. [or her] is my insertion.

³ For preaching, I use the RSV’s “envy” so I don’t have to explain “evil eye.”

⁴ Mark 7:21–23. Translation: Marcus, 454.

⁵ Johannes Behm, “καρδίᾳ,” *Theological Dictionary of New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel, trans. and ed. G.W. Bromily (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1964–1976), 4:611–13. Again, the bracketed words are my inclusive insertion.

brain, my mind, invent things for good and evil without me thinking about it. My favorite example is when I realize I will be late for something. At the exact moment, my mind invents excuses. I'm not perfect, but I work hard to avoid expressing what's popped into my head.

Matthew addresses these issues in the Sermon on the Mount. He does so from the situation of his community. In Matthew, Jesus proclaims, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them."⁶ You will recall that Jesus, as it were, ups the ante. He gives examples of what he means. I will only quote the last of them, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'⁷ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven . . . For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you salute only your [brothers and sisters], what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You, therefore, must be [complete], as your heavenly Father is [complete]."⁸

To be honest about Mark's Jesus, he sweeps aside God's commandments to the Hebrews that came to them by God's lawgiver, Moses. The eleventh chapter of Leviticus makes clear the distinction that the LORD made between foods that could be eaten and food that was unclean.⁹ Ulrich Luz wrote, "It is a Jewish Christian Church that has experienced the painful failure of its own mission to Israel and its separation from majority Israel and that now must reorient itself."¹⁰ Mark's was a gentile Christian community.¹¹

When one reads the first words of Mark's gospel from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, or the present Roman Catholic New American Bible Revised Edition, one reads, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." The RSV and the NRSV include a note, "Other ancient authorities omit the Son of God." The New American Bible puts the

⁶ Matthew 5:17.

⁷ Leviticus 19:18.

⁸ Matthew 5:46–48. I translate the Greek for *brethren* as brothers and sisters because it is inclusive. I translate the Greek *τέλειος* by its primary meaning: *complete*.

⁹ Leviticus 19:1–18.

¹⁰ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 11.

¹¹ Marcus, 19.

phrase in brackets because it's missing in some important early manuscripts. Joel Marcus wrote, "It is more likely that an early scribe added the title "Son of God" than that one omitted it; an intentional omission of such a [common] title and important epithet is improbable."¹²

In the text of Mark, Jesus is identified as "Son of God" only twice: "Whenever the unclean spirits beheld him, they fell down before him and cried out, 'You are the Son of God.' And he strictly ordered them not to make him known."¹³ The other time is at the cross, "And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that he thus breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was the Son of God!'"¹⁴ In Mark, it's only after the resurrection that his disciples will understand that he was the Son of God, the one who opened the way to eternal life. The morning of the resurrection was the morning of a new creation.

In Matthew, Jesus says, "where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them."¹⁵ Again, Ulrich Luz, "Our verse belongs to the 'high' christological statements of the New Testament . . . functionally the statement describes Jesus as acting precisely where according to biblical and Jewish belief God himself acts."¹⁶ And so we come to the Body of Christ assembled today to rejoice in God's plan for humankind to know God and to share in this life a foretaste of the life of the world to come. I close with the prayer Father Louis Weil drafted that is appointed to complete the prayers for persons being baptized: "Grant, O Lord, that all who are baptized into the death of Jesus Christ your Son may live in the power of his resurrection and look for him to come again in glory; who lives and reigns now and for ever. Amen."¹⁷

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹² Ibid., 141. I substitute "common" for Marcus's "ubiquitous."

¹³ Mark 3:11–12.

¹⁴ Mark 15:39.

¹⁵ Matthew 18:20.

¹⁶ Luz, 459.

¹⁷ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 306.