

The Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity, 29 August 2021, Year B, Proper 17
Mark 8.1-8, 14-15, 21-23

In the New Testament there are a number of lists like the one we find in today's gospel listing common ethical human shortcomings, which can cause some quandary in the preacher's mind on how to address them in a church context if at all. We can even be somewhat embarrassed by them or hesitant in mentioning them let alone dwelling on them as someone might be offended. The list given is very specific and perhaps that is why we are hesitant. Let me read it out again and then proceed to provide a short definition of each moral failing as culled from the internet. The list begins with fornication, proceeding with theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, and ending with folly. There are 12 altogether, but who is counting? Please don't worry too much about the definitions given. They are shorthand.

Fornication: the act of sexual intercourse between two people who are not married

Theft: the act or crime of stealing things belonging to another person, body or organisation

Murder: the unlawful premeditated killing of a human being by another without justification or valid reason, esp. the killing of a person with evil intent, malice

Adultery: consensual sexual intercourse between a married person and a person who is not their spouse

Avarice: extreme greed for wealth or material gain

Wickedness: the quality of being deliberately evil or morally wrong

Deceit: the action of deceiving someone by concealing or misrepresenting the truth

Licentiousness: lacking legal or moral constraints marked by a disregard for rules

Envy: a feeling of discontentment or resentment caused by someone else's good fortune, personal qualities or possessions and today we might add privilege

Slander: the action or crime of making a false spoken statement damaging a person's reputation

Pride: a deep and overweening sense of worth characterised by boastfulness and arrogance derived from one's own achievements or the achievements of someone with whom one is closely associated

Folly: lack of good sense or judgement

Many of the above will ring a bell and speak well into our today. They remain relevant. Christian life is not only about being saved or justified, it is also about the formation of a distinctive Christian character that has regard for the body, hence the mention of fornication, murder and adultery, but quickly and overwhelmingly nine other failings are mentioned. All have the same place of origin. Ritual observance however exacting will not save us from these, but they may be helpful in providing identity. We get a sense that many of these human failings are directly or indirectly connected to the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me", which forcefully reminds us of the primacy of God in all our being and doing.

These twelve ethical failings have little to do with the outward ritual with which today's gospel began, but address the inner being of humans thereby going to the heart of the matter that needs addressing. In today's gospel Jesus begins by addressing the Pharisees, he then proceeds to call a crowd together and speaks to them, finally he speaks directly to his disciples. You and I are called to be his disciples today and therefore we must always be attending to what Jesus says.

Today's gospel to my mind is one of those gospels that you need to stay with for a little to appreciate what is going on. Jesus as we learn elsewhere in Mark's Gospel is a teacher. On a few occasions he is addressed as such: Rabboni! Teacher! Indeed today's gospel reading is one of the longer teaching segments in Mark's gospel. Through provocation – some of Jesus' disciples were eating with defiled hands - Jesus proceeds to teach making two points. The first point he makes is that human traditions have come to count for more than the commandment of God. The teaching of the elders you diligently observe, but you do not give the same attention to the commandment of God. This is a damning verdict.

It isn't immediately clear from today's gospel what Jesus means when he speaks of the commandment of God. We need to fast-forward to chapter 12 of Mark's Gospel where Jesus articulates the Summary of the Law in the form of the two commandments with which we are all familiar and have heard earlier in today's service. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" It is our love of God that should always have first place and from which all else flows. We honour God by serving

him. Our service becomes concrete in how we encounter and engage with our neighbour according to a Christian matrix, based on our Christian formation although there may be a great resistance by the individual, by the individual Christian, to such formation. One encounters this all the time in oneself and others.

Returning to the list which is a part of today's gospel and with which I began I suggest that most assembled here believe that this list continues to have merit in the sense that these are things that we should be attending to so that we may lay them aside, thereby making sure that they have no hold on us. Jesus points out that people give great care and attention to certain actions (rituals), as well as their outer appearances prioritising them, and thereby fail to see that these things have come to hold sway over them, even have dominion over them. Don't make externals primary or essential. These can be fine and can even be necessary like the washing of hands, but don't make them primary in the sense that they lead you away from giving due attention to your inner being. The things that truly defile come from within. To overcome them or to put them aside requires honesty. Honesty about who we are before God – people in need of God's grace ready to be taught, guided, directed and formed into something that evidences our Christian calling: Christlikeness.

The second thing Jesus teaches in today's gospel and to which I have alluded above but also want to make explicit is as he says, "For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come... All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person." Jesus teaches us in the great Jewish tradition to love God with all our heart, our soul and our mind. This love of God has lasting consequences concerning how we are in the world, the decisions we make and the actions we take, especially in our interactions with others always being motivated by our love of God.

I shall end with words from the letter to the Ephesians. May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

(Ephesians 3:17-19)