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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17B)

August 30, 2015

Text: Mark 7:14–23

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

You are what you eat! Isn't that what we tell ourselves nowadays? With that thought in mind, who wants to be a blob of preservatives and artificial sweeteners, a walking Twinkie? Would we not rather be a balance of proteins, complex carbohydrates, and healthy fats? You are what you eat, after all! That's the craze we live with, in our modern times. Fad diets and highly organized programs come and go with frequent regularity. How many of you have tried: Atkins, South Beach, Paleo, Weightwatchers, Nutrisystem, Volumetrics? I may be dating myself a bit here but do you remember the Grapefruit diet of some years ago? Some of these are better than others. But underlying all such programs is that what you eat affects who you are.

Jesus would say something quite different. Though I must be up front, the Lord Jesus never really addresses the modern idea of dieting and nutrition health. He's more concerned with who you are as a complete person: body and soul. He would tell us that who we are is much more complex and mysterious than calories and carbohydrates or even more significant than all your earthly possessions. You might recall Jesus saying, "...one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). But let's stay a bit more focused on only one of our possessions and how Jesus uses it to teach us about His kingdom: the food we eat. Mark, the gospel writer, makes the connection to food explicit with a parenthetical comment in vs. 19, "Thus he (Jesus) declared all foods clean." Look again at vs. 14–15, Jesus said, "Hear me, all of you, and understand: There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him."

A spoiled human life, that is, a defiled life occurs from within the person. People rot away from the inside, not the other way around. That's quite the opposite of what most people think, ancient and modern. We dealt with it last week when we considered the place of traditions in one's civic and religious life. Remember that the Pharisees and scribes were scandalized when they saw some of Jesus' disciples eat with unwashed hands. Jesus' response to their religious observance of human tradition was "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me" (Mark 7:6).

The Pharisees were only concerned with the external actions of the person. Wash your hands before eating. Eat the right food. Keep the traditions of the elders. If you take care of the external things, the internal will be fine. Jesus calls this hypocrisy and vain worship, a defiled life.

And so our Lord states this truth as broad as possible, “There is nothing – note that word, nothing – outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.” Dirt on your hands can’t defile you. Washing before eating is a great hygienic practice but having clean hands and a kosher diet don’t make of pure heart. The old saying, “Cleanliness is next to godliness” is just plain wrong. Godliness only comes to us a gift from the Lord Jesus who cleanses our hearts and minds by the grace of His gospel.

According to vs. 17, the Lord’s disciples are perplexed by all this. In the privacy of a house, they ask Jesus what this all means. Jesus responds with mild chastisement, “Then are you also without understanding?” (vs. 18). Are you as befuddled as the hypocritical Pharisees and scribes? Do you really think that godliness and piety are only about doing the right things, washing hands, eating the right foods, observing the established traditions? Jesus continues in vs. 18–19, “Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.)”

Eating a proper diet won’t give you the forgiveness of sins nor will it fill you with the Holy Spirit. The reason is pretty basic. What goes into our stomach doesn’t reach the heart. And Jesus isn’t referring to that fist-sized organ pumping blood through your body. Your heart, in this verse, refers to that deepest part of you that guides your will, emotions, and actions. Eating the best food in the world will never make you a righteous, virtuous person. You are not what you eat.

Before we castigate the disciples too much, we must remember that they were Jews. Their whole life was disciplined around observing the ceremonial and moral law of the OT. They were commanded by God to observe a particular kind of diet, to wear certain kinds of clothing, to live their day to day lives within certain boundaries.

Let’s stick with food. Leviticus 11 describes the kinds of food permitted on a faithful, Jewish table. Animals with a cloven hoof and that chew the cud are clean. Beef and lamb are good. Pork and camel’s meat are definitely out. They have a cloven huff but don’t chew the cud. Fish with scales and fins are clean: trout, bass, perch, are all good.

Sadly for you southerners, catfish are unclean. They don't have scales. And no shrimp cocktail, by the way. But you'll be happy to know that all forms of locusts, crickets, and grasshoppers are clean and may be eaten to the full!!

This special diet had nothing to do with calories or any other category of physical health. The peculiar diet was to remind them of what God had already done in cleansing their hearts and minds by His grace and love. Leviticus 11:44–45 provides the rationale for eating kosher food,

⁴⁴For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy....⁴⁵For I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.

Because God had chosen this nation to be a unique people through which all the people of the world would be blessed, they were to reflect His love and grace by the way they lived, including the foods they ate. The Lord God of heaven and earth saved them from Egyptian slavery and was fulfilling the promises to the patriarchs through them. God was living among them and in them. He made them holy from within by His presence. The peculiar Jewish diet was an external sign reminding them of what God was already doing in their hearts through His grace and love.

Along the way, the Jews began to think that eating the right foods and avoiding unclean foods are what made them holy and unique and beloved by God. So when Jesus tells His disciples that what they eat could not defile them, they were shocked beyond belief. If eating a pork sandwich with shrimp cocktail on the side didn't defile them, then what did?

Remember, when Jesus says the heart, He's talking about that spiritual part of you that guides your thoughts, will, and actions. Listen to Jesus again:

²⁰“What comes out of a person is what defiles him. ²¹For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²²coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

The Lord's list is quite comprehensive. All evil thoughts, all evil actions, all evil desires come from within, “out of the heart of man...” These defile, that is, make unclean and unacceptable, the person. Do we need to consider all 13 forms of evil mentioned by Jesus? Ever had an evil thought? Been envious? Slandered anyone? What about pride, that vice the medieval Christians considered the chief sin? Sought

out sensuality in any of its various illicit forms? Deceit of any kind? We have a heart problem much more deadly than elevated cholesterol, clogged arteries, and sticky valves.

We need a new heart, our old one is corrupted by original and actual sin. Listen to this beautiful promise from the prophet Ezekiel 36, a promise that is fulfilled through the gospel of the Lord Jesus:

²⁵I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

In the waters of baptism, you were sprinkled clean and given a new heart, one that is filled with the Holy Spirit whereby you now call upon God as your Father. This new heart is set free from the law of sin and death and is alive to God in righteousness, truth, and holiness. Christ gives this new heart so that we alive to God in righteousness and holiness.

Do we struggle with sin and vice even after receiving a new heart? Yes we do. But this new heart is continually cleansed through Christ's forgiveness promised in His Word of truth. Because of Jesus has done and is doing in your life through His Word and Sacraments, you are cleansed from within. That certainly finds expression as you live out your daily lives in obedience to God's Word. With a new heart you now desire to have pure thoughts and desires as well as do righteous deeds. But it always starts from within, with a cleansed heart promised and given to you by the Lord Jesus Christ.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.