“A Love that Transforms”

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Rev. Joanna Samuelson
Acting Associate Minister

August 29, 2021

From the Pulpit
The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215
Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741
Email: home@first-church.org
Website: http://www.first-church.org
“A Love that Transforms”
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Prayer: O Holy One, it is through Your Word that You speak to our spirits; and it is through Your love that You transform our hearts. O dear God, may the words that I have to offer please You and honor You and glorify Your holy name.
In Jesus name, we pray, Amen.

How do these words – from the Gospel of Mark – fall on your ears this morning?
How do you hear them today?

Again, these words that Jesus spoke:
He said, *For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, murder, adultery, envy, slander, pride, folly and so on and so forth …*

This IS a challenging text, indeed – a very difficult story!

And never have I ever heard anyone ever say, “Oh, this passage from Mark (chapter 7) is my favorite story in the Bible!” Never. Not once!

However, during these last couple of weeks, as I have been wrestling with this text again, I have to thank my late and beloved Aunt Da for helping me to hear these words differently this time …
My Aunt Da was actually my great, great aunt. And believe it or not, she was born in 1890! And when I was a teenager (40 years ago!), she came to live with my family for about six months or so.

Aunt Da was an extraordinary woman – a woman of deep inner strength and resilience. She was a devout Christian – and a faithful Episcopalian.

She had experienced a lot of loss and hardship throughout her life … She lived through two World Wars – and the Great Depression. She raised my grandfather and his younger brother – as a single woman – because her sister (my great-grandmother) died at a young age, and my great-grandfather had abandoned them.

And yet – Aunt Da managed all on her own – with very little means – and was able to give my Grandpa Martin and Uncle Robbie what she called a ‘proper Christian upbringing!’

Now, fast forward about 70 years – to the early 1980s -- when Aunt Da moved in with us when she was about 90 years old.

She was sharp as a tack -- and very perceptive.
She was very direct – and always got straight to the point.
Plus she was very forthcoming in sharing her strong opinions, quite freely, with all of us!

Now, at that stage in my life, as a typical teenager (I was a bit of handful!), I gave my Aunt Da plenty of opportunities to – shall we say – further instruct me in the ways of behaving like a ‘Christian young lady’ (as she would put it!).
She’d make comments like:

*You spend way too much time talking on the phone to your friends!*

*When do you make time for prayer?*

*I don’t understand how that music that you listen to (Michael Jackson, Boy George …) How does that music glorify God?*

*I haven’t seen you reading your Bible lately.*

*I wonder if you have misplaced yours … again!*

*Would you like to borrow mine?*

Now, at that stage in my life – when I was 13/14 years old, I didn’t necessarily *appreciate* Aunt Da’s ongoing feedback which, at the time, felt like constant criticism …

She seemed to have such high expectations for me … and so, in response, I pushed back a bit and resisted, or ignored a lot of her well-meaning advice … even though I understand now that it came from her heart!

It has been a very long time since I’ve thought about those months when Aunt Da lived our family all those years ago …

… but *something* in our Gospel reading for today, reminded me of Aunt Da’s *high expectations* and those good intentions that she had in supporting me in my spiritual development and faith formation -- and *encouraging* me in my personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

In our text from Mark this morning, the Jesus who we meet, in this scene, like my Aunt Da, doesn’t hold back. He certainly doesn’t mince words, and he and he is brutally honest!
First, with the Pharisees and the other religious leaders, who were clearly misguided in their criticism of Jesus’ disciples by focusing, solely, on the details of the rituals of cleanness and uncleanness, and purity and defilement. And so, Jesus puts those Pharisees in their place by calling out their hypocrisy!

Then, Jesus, the rabbi, points them back to Scripture by quoting Isaiah: This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

And then, Jesus, the teacher uses this confrontation with the Pharisees as a broader teachable moment as he shifts his focus to the crowd of people that had gathered around him and says: Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. For it is from within, from the human heart that evil intentions come.

In other words, Jesus was instructing his followers then – and all of us today – by stressing that what really and truly matters is what comes from our hearts.

This text today is about the transforming power of the LOVE of GOD that changes our hearts and, therefore, changes our lives.

And as simple as that sounds, we all know that it is hard, sometimes, to truly love as God commands us:

LOVE ONE ANOTHER –
LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR –
LOVE OURSELVES
LOVE THE LEAST OF THESE
and especially LOVE OUR ENEMIES.
And yet, when we truly open ourselves up to receive this unconditional and radical LOVE of GOD, not only are our own hearts changed, but our responses to the needs of one another -- and to the needs of the world around us -- are then also changed.

Yes, this GIFT of LOVE from GOD is a LOVE that changes us from the inside out.
It is a LOVE through which we are made new.
It is a love through which we are TRANSFORMED!

In recent days, my heart has been filled with GRATITUDE for all of you … and for the GIFT that it has been to be able to journey with you throughout this summer while Rev. Tim has been on sabbatical.

I also have been touched by the many different and creative ways that I have witnessed and experienced GOD’s TRANSFORMING LOVE as it is expressed through you and through your deep commitments and numerous ministries as a congregation!

And GOD’S TRANSFORMING LOVE is certainly felt through the intentionality and compassion with which you care for one another -- even as you fully embrace your call – as First Church -- to respond to the pressing needs and injustices within our community and in the world around us – today.

I’d like to close this morning with a powerful prayer by Rabbi Jack Reimer. It is a prayer that describes God’s transforming love and work in the world which always begins within our own hearts:
We cannot merely pray to You, O God, to end war:
for we know You made the world in a way that we must find
our own path of peace
within ourselves and with our neighbor.

We cannot merely pray to You, O God, to root out prejudice:
for You have already given us eyes with which to see the good in all people
if we would only use them rightly.

We cannot merely pray to You, O God, to end hunger:
for You have already given us the resources with which to feed the entire world
if we would only use them wisely.

We cannot merely pray to You, O God, to end despair:
for You have already given us the power to meet the needs
of underserved neighborhoods
and to offer hope if we would only use our power justly.

We cannot merely pray to You, O God, to end disease:
for You have already given us great minds with which to search out
cures and healing
if we would only use them constructively.

Therefore, we pray to You, instead, O God, for strength, determination,
and will power:

to DO instead of just to pray—
to BECOME instead of merely to wish.

AMEN!