

Proper 17B Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

“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.”

If we can be really honest here for a moment, I suspect that we each can admit that it is nice to have a scapegoat when we mess up things, large or small.

After all, someone to blame is very handy thing.

Someone who will carry your dark side so that you do not have to carry it yourself.

It is helpful to have an enemy or two at hand, we find.

When we get into the Bible the Pharisees and scribes often perform this function for us. They make very convenient targets, those rule-bound, holier-than-thou fellows, refusing to believe the good news of relationship with Jesus.

But the Pharisees and scribes were not buying this good news. They had been following their rules for a long time. They had both the written Torah and the oral Torah that set every aspect of human life under God's will.

Everything that needed doing could be done in a holy way, and the Pharisees were totally devoted to living that kind of holiness.

They were lay people who had standards for everything, and they cut themselves no slack.

The Sabbath was observed, everything was tithed, right down to the spices they put into their food; every meal to be eaten in purity equal to the priest eating in the temple.

So while we may criticize them for rejecting the good news, they were manifestly not bad people. They were actually some of the best people around.

Chances are we each have a Pharisee somewhere on our personal list of saints. Persons who light the way for us with their unusual, faithful obedience, helping us to find our way, to raise the standards of our lives.

The Pharisees kept very high standards, especially about eating. Standards like what you could eat and not eat, with whom, out of what kind of pots.

Given that hands were the silverware in the ancient world you did not want to share your babaganosh with someone who had just come in from trimming his sheep's hooves without washing first.

However, purity was also a theological category. Physical impurity was seen as a sign of moral impurity. Dirty hands pointed to a dirty heart.

Purity laws were set up to protect true believers from contagion.

No wonder the Pharisees were so appalled when Jesus' disciples dug into their lunch without washing their hands first.

It was not just bad manners; it was bad faith.

It seemed to the Pharisees that the disciples were scorning the way of God, defying the tradition of the elders.

Jesus was quite careless about the purity laws, as a matter of fact.

They had seen him lay hands on a leper and a dead child, send a bunch of pigs over a cliff, sit down to supper with a house full of sinners and violate the Sabbath without a moment's remorse. He

did not seem to care about such things.

So when the Pharisees criticized his disciples, he lit into them. It

was as if he was saying 'stop kicking the dog and go look in the mirror.'

Being so very careful about how you live and what you eat and the company you eat; none of that will keep you safe.

The real danger is not from the outside waiting to creep into you
through your mouth.

It is already inside of you, in your own heart, he said.

Well, we do not have obvious purity laws anymore, so I guess we
could assume that this is an outdated story of Mark's gospel.

Maybe we have lost our appetite for scapegoats.

Not so fast. I think not.

I was reminded once again how wrong it would be to assume that
while reading A. O. Scott's NYT review this week of the current
film "Operation Finale."

The film is a dramatization of the efforts to find Adolf Eichmann in
South America and get him to Israel for trial.

The Holocaust was of course the ultimate example of scapegoating.

But interestingly, Scott points out that as dramatized by the fine acting of Ben Kingsley, it not only emphasizes the evil of evil, but in a secondary way its charm.

And Scott writes the “people of great evil do not cease to be human and provoke ordinary human responses.”

Hannah Arendt who wrote her controversial book “Eichmann in Jerusalem” popularized the phrase “the banality of evil” referring to the gray bureaucratic manner of Eichmann on the stand in Jerusalem.

Arendt must have meant something like what A. O. Scott writes about.

Everyday wickedness and its normalization in the ever-so human heart.

Perversity can lie close to the surface in the human heart.

And human perpetrators even of monumental tragedies can be marked not by evidence of the demonic, but rather the seemingly

mundane, everyday ordinariness. This is what Hannah Arendt
sensed in Adolph Eichmann.

The man was ludicrous, but his deeds were evil.

“The longer one listened to him,” writes Arendt about Eichmann,
“the more obvious it became his inability to speak was closely
connected with an inability to think, namely, to think from the
standpoint of somebody else.”

We know that towers of evil can be constructed in the name of the
good.

We currently face a world seized by everyday tyrants capable of
perpetuating enormous harm with their small human hands.

I remember seeing the films “Philadelphia” and “Schindler’s List”
years ago, and glimpsed back at the second one briefly this week
on Netflix.

In both of them, certain groups of people are declared unclean: people with AIDS in one, Jews in the other. They were removed from humanity, shunned as unclean.

Avoid contact at the threat of sickness.

It is hard to forget the one scene from “Schindler’s List”, in which the Nazi commandant Amon Goeth has fallen in love with Helen Hirsch, his Jewish maid.

He visits her one night in the cellar where she lives to thank her for her hard work.

Before long he draws back and circles her standing there in her white slip.

“I understand that, strictly speaking, you are not a human being,” he says to her.

“You are Jewish vermin, I know, but I ask you,” as he reaches out his hand, maybe to touch her, to caress her, but draws it quickly

back, “are those the eyes of a rodent? Are those the lips of a rodent? Is that the hair of a rodent?”

He is insanely struggling with his own purity laws. He is the ranking member of a superior race.

She is the germ that threatens his race. And yet he loves her, but cannot love her without contamination, so instead he beats her, heaping wreckage upon her.

And who, who is the rodent here, we could ask.

What Jesus knows about us is so very important, and it is so hard to hear it from him.

The danger is not out there with the people who are somehow different, who frighten or compete with or disturb us.

The real danger is here, in our human hearts, in the part of us that wants to cut ourselves off from them – because they are the “other.”

The mystery of darkness in our world is real, no doubt about it.
Plenty of hate, ill will, disregard for the common good, indifference
to the suffering, perpetual lying, unkindness, demonizing, tribal
partisanship, and scapegoating.

Fear and loathing abound in so many places!

And it can appear at any point at any time, from the wreckage of
Syria to the mendacity and small mindedness in the White House
and Congress, and all the way to small meanness's at our dinner
table.

But until we confront the everyday darkness in ourselves we cannot
very well take on the darkness on the larger fields of our lives.

We cannot fight the shadow we will not own.

When asked why she does what she does, Mother Teresa replied that she engages in her ministry of love because she knows there is a Hitler inside of her.

And that deeply shocks us. Whatever could she possibly have meant?

But Jesus would not be shocked, because he knows the potential of our hearts for good and evil, and wants us to know that, as well. It is the brightness, love and compassion with which God has gifted us that Jesus wants to win the day.

Give me what you hate, he says, what you fear, out there and in your heart, the darkest in you.

I am not afraid of getting dirty.

Germs do not scare me. Sit now at my Table.

Bring your whole selves, the light and the dark, to my Table where I will take it, bless it, break it and give it all back to you

transformed, and all for the sake of transformation of the darkness
you will surely encounter at every level of life around you.

Come to my Table and eat!