

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST  
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON  
AUGUST 30, 2009  
“HANDS AND HEARTS”  
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23  
10:00 A.M. SERVICE**

As followers of Christ we dare not wait until we feel love for others before we help them. Often the compassionate and caring feelings are the result of loving actions. Doing good helps one to become good. As servants of Christ we must be willing to serve others whether we feel like it or not.

The religion of the Pharisees stressed outward actions almost exclusively. Jesus was more interested in inward attitudes. But Jesus understood the importance of both inward attitudes and outward actions. He saw them as two sides of the same coin. Changing either one helps to change the other.

Faith involves the whole person. Our biblical ancestors did not distinguish between body and soul, or the physical and the spiritual, as easily as we often do. God created us as complex but unitary beings. The response of faith involves the total self and one's entire life. God cares about both what is in our hearts and what is in our hands.

Our mothers were right. Hand-washing is important. During the recent swine flu scare we were told that one of the few things we could do to protect ourselves was to frequently wash our hands. If you asked how long you should wash your hands, you may have been told, **“As long as it takes you to sing ‘Happy Birthday to You.’”** When we see our dentists, doctors, and food servers washing their hands we may think, **“Cleanliness is next to godliness!”**

There is a religious question that has been around forever, and may be asked in a variety of ways. Is religious faith an internal or an external reality? What matters more, what we believe or what we do? Does true

faith focus more on the hands or on the heart? It is frustrating that no matter which you choose someone can make the case for the opposite being true. The bottom line is that biblical faith is both internal and external, involving both our hands and our hearts. The problem is not in deciding which supersedes the other, but in keeping them in some kind of healthy balance. Sin is seldom the embracing of something conspicuously evil. Sin is more often a matter of elevating something good to the level of a god.

Cleanliness can become an obsession. Being sanitary is one thing, but germ-a-phobia is an impossible way to live! Christopher Fry, in **The Lady's not for Burning**, had one of his characters say, **“What after all / Is a halo? It's only one more thing to keep clean.”** In Jesus' world it was the Pharisees who were preoccupied with cleanliness. One day they saw that Jesus' disciples did not wash their hands before they ate, and they accosted Jesus about it. Jesus accused them of hypocrisy. Jesus was not opposed to hand-washing! It was an issue of balance.

The Pharisees were concerned with ritual cleanliness, not personal hygiene. Their world was comprised of **“clean”** and **“unclean”** things. A Gentile was unclean. A dead body was unclean. Certain objects were unclean. If you touched something unclean you were considered religiously defiled until you had purified yourself. Hand-washing in this instance was a purification rite. Jesus accused the Pharisees of following petty religious regulations while their hearts were far from God.

We must distinguish, as Jesus did, between merely human concerns and the things that relate directly to God and to God's will. Jesus revered the Mosaic Law, but he was vigorously opposed to legalistic applications of the Law that were considered more important than basic goodness and social justice. Jesus affirmed the spirit of the ancient Law over the letter of the Law. To his followers Jesus explained that a clean heart is infinitely more important than **“clean”** hands. Nothing outside us can defile us, said Jesus, because it goes into the stomach and passes on! What comes from the heart is what defiles a person. Evil does not reside in external objects but in the human heart.

We make mostly romantic and inspirational associations with the heart, but the heart is terribly complex and endlessly ambiguous. A biblical

proverb says, ***“Guard your heart more than any treasure, for from it flow the springs of life.” (Pr 4:23)*** And Jeremiah claims that ***“the heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?” (17:9)*** Jesus insists that the heart is the source of the evil we do, and is what defiles us. Jesus said, ***“Blessed are the pure in heart.” They are the ones who see God. (Mt 5:8)***

The work of the hands, both for good and for evil, is inspired by the heart. What begins in the heart ends up in the hands. King Saul consulted a medium from Endor; and, speaking of the risk she had taken for him, the woman said, ***“I have taken my life in my hand.” (1 Sam 28:21)*** What a remarkable phrase! For better or for worse, we do it all the time. Good and evil begin within, and then the hands serve the heart.

William Glasser developed a therapeutic method he called **“Reality Therapy,”** that focused the patient on the future more than on the past. He also recommended what he called **“positive addiction.”** He said we have made a mistake in making **“addiction”** an altogether negative word. Change or growth does not always happen from the inside out, but sometimes happens from the outside in. Glasser used jogging and meditation as his examples, one active and the other passive. Beginning a new discipline, he said, is always difficult. As we continue jogging or meditating, however, it becomes easier. If we continue long enough, it will become an **“addiction,”** something we simply can’t do without!

Jesus said, ***“Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (Mt 6:21)*** Some things must not wait until we feel like doing them. Take giving, for example. A couple who lived on a farm in Sanger, Texas, had not finished high school themselves and had certainly never heard of Dartmouth College. But they suddenly became the most avid supporters of Dartmouth in North Texas! They read everything they could find about the school and talked about it constantly. Why? In one of the proudest moments of their lives, one of their three sons was awarded a scholarship to Dartmouth. See? They put their treasure in Dartmouth and their hearts followed.

Sometimes hearts have to follow hands. **“And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: ‘Give me a light that I may tread safely**

**into the unknown.’ And he replied: ‘Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.’” (Minnie Louise Haskins)**

A world of need awaits us. Some may say, **“I will do God’s will when I know God’s will.”** But you do not have to wait to do God’s will. Doing God’s will begins with doing the things you already know to do. There is more of God’s will in what we already know to do than we imagine. If we will make the first move toward a needy situation, God will guide us, step by step, to do what needs to be done.

Character is built by doing good, not only by having good intentions. I would love to help you walk in God’s way and take on the characteristics of God. Yes, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.