

## **Walls, Stomachs & Hearts**

© Rev. Marilyn Hedgpeth

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Mark 7:1-8, 14-23

**Walls:** At this year's Tony Awards for the best theatrical productions, one of the top winners was a musical called *Hadestown*, a retelling of the ancient Greek myth where Orpheus journeys to the underworld to rescue his fiancée, Eurydice.

*Hadestown* was nominated for 14 awards, winning eight, including Best Musical.

The call/response song that ends Act I is called "Why We Build the Wall".

*Why do we build the wall, my children, my children, why do we build the wall?*

*We build the wall to keep us free, that's why we build the wall.*

*We build the wall to keep us free.*

*How does the wall keep us free, my children, my children,*

*how does the wall keep us free?*

*The wall keeps out the enemy, and we build the wall to keep us free.*

*That's why we build the wall. We build the wall to keep us free.*

*Who do we call the enemy, my children, my children, who do we call the enemy?*

*The enemy is poverty, and the wall keeps out the enemy.*

*And we build the wall to keep us free.*

*That's why we build the wall. We build the wall to keep us free.*

*Because we have and they have not!*

*My children, my children*

*Because they want what we have got...*

(Mitchell, Anais. "Why We Build the Wall". *Hadestown*, 2009)

The song has the feel of those classic folk ballads, which raise rhetorical questions

like, "How many roads must a man walk down?,

or "Where have all the flowers gone?"

Interestingly, it was written ten years ago,

long before our current wall-building conundrum ever came to be an issue.

It touches a nerve, I think, because it addresses a legitimate human way

of being in the world as ancient as the Greek myths and the stories of Jesus.

It addresses *a way of separatism*: our human impulse to retreat, withdraw,

and build walls of cinderblock, steel, razor wire, social laws, rules,

attitudes and even faith traditions to separate us from them,

insider from outsider, clean from unclean, righteous from unrighteous,

neighbor from stranger, white from brown, red, yellow or black.

Theologian Howard Thurman knew about the walls. In his 1949 signature book,

*Jesus and the Disinherited*, "he was attempting

to explore and explain what the teachings of Jesus have to say

to those who stand at the moment with their backs against the wall...

the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed `...

There was never any doubt in Thurman's mind that the life and teachings of Jesus,

'the poor Jew' of Nazareth, the disinherited, himself, threatened subject

of Roman power, were especially relevant to the ever-present

contingent of (Black) men and women who line the serrated, cutting surfaces

of the wall called America."

(Harding, Vince, re: Thurman, Howard. *Jesus and the Disinherited*, p. viii)

So, what is Jesus of Nazareth, the walled-in, minority inhabitant  
of an occupied Roman territory, saying to us today  
about our inclination to throw up walls of separation  
in our frightening and volatile world? Why *do* we build walls?

Who is being walled in, and who is being walled out?

Who is more free: those inside, or those outside the walls?

And is this a viable option, or just a temporary fix?

In today's passage Jesus and friends seem to run into a wall  
of kvetching Pharisees and friends on their return  
from feeding five thousand of Galilee's poor and dispossessed,  
even allowing their sick to reach out and touch them,  
without giving a second thought to washing their hands.

Maybe like me, these Temple gatekeepers are tainted by OCD,  
and the inclination to run for the hand sanitizer whenever they sense  
what I call the germ factor.

Nevertheless, considering the great humanitarian needs being met by Jesus  
why is this simple oversight so upsetting to the Pharisees and scribes?

**Stomachs:** The North Carolina State Motto, printed on our state seal and flag,  
is *Esse Quam Videri*, "To Be, Rather Than To Seem".

Jesus has just provided food for 5,000 *hungry* men, women and children  
with five loaves and two fish, miraculously!

Yet his colleagues in ministry, the Pharisees and scribes are laser-focused  
upon why Jesus and his disciples play loose with the traditions of the elders

and eat unclean food, with unclean people, using unclean hands.

Two scholars are especially helpful for me in understanding this controversy and the underlying clash of values.

Jewish scholar Amy-Jill Levine observes that “a central issue in Mark’s Gospel is the relation of the followers of Jesus to the purity rules of Judaism, rules that helped to define Jewish identity”.

(Levine, Amy-Jill and Brettler, Marc Zvi. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, p. 63)

She notes that while Pharisees were known for observing the traditional practices of the elders, the Saducees did not, nor did most of the Jews, especially those outside of Jerusalem.

Mark, in his Gospel, questions whether these purity practices are merely human rules and traditions, *long time passing*, or whether they are truly commandments of God; a good question for the church to chew on today in regard to our own traditions.

Jesus calls these Pharisees “hypocrites”, a term from Greek drama, which means “a person who plays a part”; one who *seems*, rather than to *be*.

And then, according to Levine, Jesus uses exaggeration and a little potty humor to make his point, stating first to the Pharisees, and then to his own disciples, “Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside (like non-kosher food) cannot defile, since it enters not the heart, but the stomach,

and goes into the sewer...but it is what comes out of a person that defiles.” (v. 17-20)

Then Jesus lists off twelve degrading actions that can issue from a defiling person.

We could probably add a few more to his list from our day and time, like bullying, abuse, neglect, and brutal tweets.

“All these evil things come from within, and *they* defile a person,” Jesus says,

not the food or people around us, which are all inherently good.  
We are not really used to Jesus being humorous, or especially using potty humor,  
but hey, it gets their attention and it gets our attention,  
if we truly are paying attention, instead of seeming to pay attention!  
*Esse Quam Videri* ; To be, rather than to seem!

I found theologian Marcus Borg most insightful with the real issue at stake here.  
Borg says that the scribes and Pharisee are operating from a paradigm of  
purity which adheres to the motto, *be holy or other, as God is holy other*.  
Thus the purity code is the dominant paradigm out of which they seek to imitate God.  
In contrast, the dominant attribute of God for which Jesus now advocates  
is to *be compassionate as God is compassionate* .

Jesus feels that this *imitatio dei*, imitation of God, must best all others  
in guiding the way believers relate to their neighbors in the world.

The Hebrew and Greek word for compassion means "womb love".

"As a mother loves the children of her womb and feels for the children of her womb,  
so God loves us and feels for us, for all of her children.

In its sense of 'like a womb,' compassion has nuances of giving life, nourishing,  
caring, perhaps embracing and encompassing.

For Jesus, it is what God is like....

According to Jesus, *compassion* is to be the central quality of a life  
faithful to God, the compassionate One," Borg says.

(Borg, Marcus. *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, p. 48-49)

So we can see how Jesus would clash with his colleagues; how a wall  
of differentiation would rise up between these titans of faith and praxis.

The purity system creates a world with sharp social boundaries between

pure and impure, clean and unclean, righteous and sinner,  
male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile.

However, "in the message and activity of Jesus, we see an alternative social vision:  
a community shaped not by the ethos and politics of purity,  
but by the ethos and politics of compassion." (Borg, p. 52)

### **Hearts:**

The key word in this whole passage, I think, is the word "heart":

Quoting Isaiah, Jesus says, "This people honors me with their lips,  
but there are *hearts* far from me" (v. 6); which in local NC vernacular  
means - they seem, rather than to be.

And then later, Jesus says, "It is what comes out of a person that defiles.

For it is from within, from the human *heart*, that evil intentions come." (v. 21)

Now, the Bible says a lot about our hearts:

The Shema says: "Love the Lord your God with all your *heart*, and with  
all your soul, and with all your strength. These commandments  
that I give you today are to be upon your *heart!*" (Deut 6: 5-6)

When Samuel the old priest follows the Lord's directive to anoint a new king  
over Israel, his inclination is to choose the tallest and most handsome  
of Jesse's sons to be king.

But the Lord says to Samuel, "The Lord does not look at the things people look at.

People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the *heart.*"  
(1 Samuel 16: 7b)

In Psalm 51, a psalm of lament and confession, the psalmist declares:

"You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;  
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite *heart*,  
O God, you will not despise." (Psalm 51: 17)

And Jesus teaches frequently about the state of our hearts, saying in the

Beatitudes, "Blessed are the pure in *heart*, for they will see God." (Matt. 5: 8)

So Jesus is not poo-pooing the purity code of his religious colleagues per se;

he is merely suggesting that it is misplaced, if it speaks of external purity only rather than internal purity, heart purity, which what the Lord desires of us.

Let me give you one local example, which tweaked my heart recently,

and which I think highlights the *heart* of Jesus' teaching.

The UNC doctor, Charles van der Horst, who drowned tragically while

participating in a swim marathon in the Hudson River, was Jewish, like Jesus.

He was raised in a Jewish family in the Netherlands, the son of Holocaust

survivors, his mother and father having met in an internment camp there;

survivors of an extreme politic and praxis of purity.

His family immigrated to the United States in the 1950's to pursue the American dream.

And while van der Horst easily could have reversed the Golden Rule

and treated others as his family, themselves, had been treated;

he chose to live into that alternative social vision.

He chose to live and act from a paradigm of compassion, not of purity.

After graduating from Duke University and Harvard Medical School in 1979,

van der Horst returned to North Carolina to start a center

for the study of AIDS at UNC, at a time when those infected with

with the disease were being treated as untouchables, as pariahs, as lepers,

as unclean and impure.

But van der Horst was their champion and their advocate,

the one reaching out to touch and heal while the rest of culture  
donned gloves, masks and gowns and raised those walls of separation.  
And while his death was tragic, his life was a exemplary. I wish I had known this man!  
Colleagues lauded van der Horst for his *compassion* and courage.  
“He was committed to making sure other people around NC knew how to  
treat patients with HIV and how to deal with them on a human level,”  
said David Jolly, who met van der Horst through the Lesbian and Gay Health project,  
which was the first AIDS service organization in North Carolina.

Gov. Roy Cooper posted on Facebook: “Dr. Charlie van der Horst’s life and work  
were defined by *compassion*.”

From his time volunteering in North Carolina’s free clinics  
to his efforts on the front lines of the HIV/AIDS epidemic,  
he made our state and world better. “

(Quillin, Martha and Murphy, Kate. “Physician was AIDS Researcher, Societal  
Warrior”. *The Herald Sun*, June 18, 2019)

Charles van der Horst was a remarkable person in that way.

And I know that some of you here at this church also reached out to help those  
struggling with HIV/AIDS during those early years of separation and walls.

That you acted from a politic of compassion, and not from a politic of purity,  
gets at the *heart* of what Jesus is trying to model and convey.

You were compassionate, as God is compassionate.

You acted this way because the kingdom of heaven is like this.

You did not let things outside of you defile you.

Instead you let the Jesus-leanings of your heart regard others around you as holy,



and wholly touchable; as also made in the image of a holy God.  
Your purity code was a purity of heart, that reflected Jesus, who said,  
"Blessed are the pure in heart, for you will see God."  
Of course that was then, and this is now. But I think our hearts are up to  
today's obstacles, walls, and challenges.

Why do we build the wall, my children, my children, why do we build the wall,  
when the heart of our own heart, Jesus, offers us a new heart  
and a new spirit; a heart not of stone, but of flesh (Ezekiel 36: 24)  
for accepting and loving all of God's children. Amen.