

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“The Enemy Within”

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“What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person” (Mark 4:20-23).

The Pharisees saw enemies all around. Their enemies were the Romans whose armies swept through the land victorious and had been occupying it ever since.

They were the tax collectors, those treasonous wretches who were complicit with the Romans and made themselves filthy rich in the process.

Their enemies were the sinners, those who callously ignored the written laws of Moses, and oral traditions of the Jewish people. They did whatever was right in their own eyes.

Their enemies were those who defiled everything they touched because they ignored ceremonial washings of cups and hands and the like.

Their enemy was also Jesus, who did not show proper and deferential respect for the learned Pharisees, and whose teachings undermined their status and authority.

The Pharisees had many enemies. Notice, their enemies were other people. Their enemies were always external. Their enemies were always out there some place.

Our text is a continuation of last week’s Gospel lesson, where Jesus told the Pharisees their ceremonial washing of cups and pots and copper vessels will not purify the heart within. You can scrub that cup for all it’s worth, but it won’t do a thing to cleanse the dark stains of sin from the heart.

In this week’s Gospel lesson, Jesus now invites the crowd into the conversation. He expands the audience. (It may have been the same crowd whom he had miraculously fed in the previous chapter with just five loaves and two fish.) He says to them, “Hear me, **all of you**, and understand” (7:14). Then, with everyone’s attention, Jesus tells them what it is that makes a person unclean. It’s not unclean utensils or unclean foods. It’s not what goes into the body that is the problem. It’s what comes out. Verse 21, “Out of the heart of man come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness”. Such things come out, because they are already lurking within. That is, your enemies are not always out there some place. Your enemies are not always external. For you and I are sinners through and through, and so we have an enemy within.

“We have met the enemy and he is us.” Perhaps you have heard a version of that quote. The original came from an American naval officer in 1813 after the Battle of Lake Erie, but it was made popular by Pogo the Possum in several cartoon strips in the early 1970’s. It’s a quote that nicely summarizes our tendency to be our own worst enemies because of our sin. But, just like the Pharisees, we prefer to think of our enemies as always external: someone one or something else.

Who are your enemies? Our culture is so polarized that you can find a mortal enemy around every corner. Who is your enemy? Is it the network pushing fake news? Is it the person who gravitates toward fake news on social media, devours it whole, and then spreads it? Who is your enemy? Is it the political party that is trying to destroy the country? Is it people buying lies about the vaccine? Is it the local school board? Is it the colleague at work whose talent is lapped by his ambition? Is it the special interest group pushing its selfish agenda? Is it the neighbor nearby? There are many potential enemies. Notice, like the Pharisees, we always focus on someone (or something) else, someone external, something out there.

But in this text, Jesus says, “Not so fast.” Your enemy lurks within you: the evil thoughts, the sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, envy, slander, pride.” He rattles them off one by one and we are deeply familiar with each of them.

We call it the old sinful Adam, the old sinful nature you inherited from your parents and grandparents going all the way back to sinful Adam and Eve. Try with all your might, you'll never defeat that enemy. You'll never be able to imprison the Old Adam because he goes wherever you go. You'll never be able to escape him or overwhelm him with brute force. You'll never be able to outsmart him. Sin is the enemy within, and it aims to put an end to everything good in your life and then put an end to you.

Now, unlike Jesus who emphasizes the enemy within, our epistle lesson emphasizes our external enemies. Ephesians 6:12, "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." It's almost as if Paul is saying our enemy is NOT within, but rather far above flesh and blood.

So, which is it? Is the enemy within? Or is it without?

Of course, the answer is, "Yes." Your enemies are both internal AND external. They are both inside of us AND outside of us. It is the stuff of your heart (the slander, pride, covetousness, and the like), but it is also the spiritual forces of evil. Your enemy is the old Adam who wreaks havoc on the inside, but also the old evil foe who prowls around outside seeking one to devour. The reality is we have two enemies (or three if you want to follow Luther and add the world to the Devil and our sinful flesh). And these enemies are relentless. They will never quit. They will never lay down their arms. They will never send up the white flag. Their common aim is to maim and kill and destroy.

So, what does this mean for you and me? First, it means we are in trouble. History teaches us it is really difficult to fight a war on multiple fronts. Sending troops and resources in multiple directions often results in disaster and defeat. You have multiple enemies on multiple fronts. You need to be on your guard and vigilant and ready. But that's hard because you and I have limited resources. Therefore, we are in the habit of ignoring at least one (and usually two or three) of our enemies. We fixate on those enemies that are easily identifiable (the other political party, for instance). At the same time, we ignore or even deny the reality of the devil.

Most Americans no longer believe the devil exists. Again, history teaches that the most dangerous enemy is the one we assume doesn't exist because we never expect their attacks. Think what a field day our old evil foe is having while people refuse to acknowledge his existence.

Moreover, the evil lurking within our hearts is an enemy that we also choose to overlook. We prefer to think of ourselves as righteous victims, never the *source* of pain or evil. But we have enemies within and without and on multiple fronts and some that we aren't even aware of, and that means we're in trouble.

The good news is there is one who reigns over our enemies! This is the very good news! There is one who has defeated our enemies for us, all of them, the sin within, and the devil without, and the world and all those forces that hate us and wish us ill. In Jesus, God has defeated them all. When Jesus rose from the dead, he rose as the victor over sin and over the devil and over death. He has given the old evil foe and the old Adam a good beating and keeps them both on a short leash. He sits at the right hand of God and has all the power and authority. There is no enemy on earth or in hell that can forcefully separate you from Jesus. In the familiar words of Paul, "Neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39). "The rulers, the authorities, the cosmic powers over this present darkness, the spiritual forces of evil" . . . they are no match against our heavenly Father. They cause temporal trouble and suffering, but when Jesus returns, He will end their tyranny for all time.

Finally, this promise of salvation not only fills us with hope for future relief from our enemies, it also transforms our lives here and now. We live in the victory Christ has won for us. Therefore, until He takes us home, we live and move and have our being under His grace, his forgiveness, in His Kingdom. We don't cooperate with the spiritual forces of evil. We don't capitulate to the devil. We have no excuse for giving in to the temptations within our hearts. We live in the victory of Christ, not under the fallen flags of our vanquished enemies.

We live also with the comfort that the sin he forgives, he remembers no more. We live with the assurance that the Lamb of God has taken away our sin. We live acknowledging that though we have enemies within and without, we have a Savior, Jesus Christ, who has won the victory through His death and resurrection and given that victory to us with His forgiveness in the means of grace. Thanks be to God. Amen.