

From the Heart

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

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson September 2, 2012

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

I know it sounds a little strange, but the first thing I thought of the other day when I read this morning's Gospel lesson was the *Flip Wilson Show* from the early seventies. Actually, I didn't get a chance to see much of the actual show – it was among those shows that just weren't watched in the Martindale household. What I do remember was one of the catch phrases that came from the show and became part of American culture. At key points in the show, especially channeling a character named Geraldine, Flip would look sidelong into the camera with a mischievous smirk and announce, "The Devil made me do it."

Actually Flip wasn't particularly original with that line. For those of you who may have missed the *Flip Wilson Show* and for those of you who, like most of America by 1980, have forgotten all about Flip, you might remember the same line from the three thousand year old record of the much more ancient creation stories. Maybe you remember the line better as, "The serpent tricked me and I ate."

By the time of Jesus's interaction with the Pharisees in this morning's Gospel, things had gotten considerably more sophisticated in the calculations of the causes of evil. The Pharisees, you may remember, had used the laws that God had given the people of Israel in the Exodus wilderness to set up a very complex system of rituals and customs. Have a seizure? You must be possessed by a demon because of your sinfulness. Have a contagious skin problem? You must have walked more than the allowed number of paces on the Sabbath, you must not have wrapped your prayer shawl correctly, you must have brought a lamb to the sacrifice that had some overlooked blemish. Born blind? The only question was who had sinned, you or your parents. Fail to properly wash your cups, pots, and bronze kettles according to the proscribed ritual? That will render you unclean. That makes you sinful and unrighteous. That will knock you out of relationship with God.

Nowadays, of course, we know better. Nowadays we would never think of blaming our behavior on the whispers of a serpent, or the proddings of a devil, or our failure to follow a strict set of dietary and ritual laws. Have a seizure? Call the neurologist. Have a skin problem. Call the dermatologist. Born blind? Call the ophthalmologist or the surgeon or the geneticist. Fail to properly wash your cups, pots, and bronze kettles? You're likely to have problems, all right – but of a *gastrointestinal* rather than an ontological nature.

And we've grown considerably past the "Devil made me do it" stage as well. Good old Flip knew it, too. That's why the indulgent smirk. Nowadays we may believe in angels – about a billion books on Amazon say so. But we generally believe they are here to do *our* bidding not to offer unsolicited advice. Nowadays, the struggle of good and evil is usually reduced to a little winged us and a little horned us battling it out on our shoulders, usually with the "naughty" us winning out so we can have some oh-so-well-deserved fun, or at least an indulgently delicious dessert. Nowadays, we don't particularly worry about the kind of spiritual warfare that requires the whole armor of God that Paul was talking about in last Sunday's Epistle reading. Nowadays, if we believe in the Devil at all, we are certainly *not* going to admit that he made us do a doggone thing.

No, these days, with our sophisticated understanding of genetics and sociology and the whys and the wherefores of the human psyche, we point with confidence to all sorts of more *rational*, more *reasonable* things that cause our problems. Have an addiction or act out sexually? It's not your fault; there's a gene on the fourteenth or fifteenth chromosome that *drives* your behavior. You were born that way. What are you gonna' do? Beat your wife and kids? It's not

your fault; your own parents abused *you*. You're just part of a cycle. What are you gonna' do? Lie, steal, cheat... kill? It's just a matter of mobilizing political support to correct the evil and unjust culture that has unfairly oppressed you and driven your behavior underground. You're just one more victim of society. What are you gonna' do?

For every problem we have, we can point to a hundred outside "demons" that have been the creator or the contributor or the cause of our problem. These days, nobody but a comedian would smirk at you and say, "The Devil made me do it." But we might sit on the witness stand, we might swear before a Congressional committee, we might stand in a protest line, and say that all sorts of outside forces have conspired to make us do or say or *be* whatever it is we are inclined to *do*.

But you see, we have it as wrong as Flip and the Pharisees. The real problem, as Jesus said, is not what comes from *outside* us. The real problem isn't what we eat, or how we clean our hands, or who has told us what. The real problem isn't what goes *in*. The real problem is what comes *out*. The real problem is what comes from deep within us. The real problem with you and with me and with every one of us since our first ancestors just had to have that bite of fruit, is the human heart. We were built to be vessels of God's love for us, to reflect that love – back to God, and out to others as well. But from the beginning, our prideful hearts have taken us another way. We have taken love and bent it around into and onto ourselves. We have decided that the only one worthy of consideration... is *us*. We have twisted even the brightest and best of God's gifts into things foul and perverse and sinful. And we have, from the very beginning, blamed all that sin and all the resulting pain and trouble, on something *outside* ourselves – a serpent, the Devil, genetics, our family, society – instead of looking at the real *heart* of the problem. You know, the heart that beats within your breast and mine.

"For it is from the human heart," Jesus said, "that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly." Did you hear any in there to which *you* can relate? "All these evil things," Jesus says, "come *from within*, and *they* defile a person." We don't particularly need another ritualistic program. We don't need another excuse. We *sure* don't need another wry, indulgent smirk. What we need, if we are to win the struggle against evil in our lives, is nothing less than a new heart. To overcome all the *stuff* from outside that pushes in on our lives, what we need is to let *our* wills become one with the will of the one who made us in the first place. What we need to be clean and pure in God's eyes, is to let our hearts be renewed, and remolded, and made once again into our Creator's own likeness.

And that, of course, is *precisely* what Jesus Christ offers, two thousand years ago on a hill outside the city gate, and this very day, this very hour, and each and *every* moment. Amen.