



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
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MINDING THE MIND

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Mark 7.14-23

Jesus called the crowds to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside you can make you unclean by eating it. It is what comes out that makes you unclean.

After he left the crowd and entered the house with his disciples, they asked him about this parable. He explained to them: "Don't you see that nothing going into your body can make you unclean, for it doesn't go into your heart but into your stomach and then out of your body. What comes out of your body is what makes you unclean. From within, from the heart and mind, come evil thoughts, immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make you unclean."

Dr. Daniel Amen in his book *Change Your Brain, Change your Life* says that "your brain is the hardware of your soul. It is the hardware of your very essence as a human being... How your brain works determines how happy you are, how effective you feel, and how well you interact with others. Your brain patterns help you (or hurt you) with your [relationships] and religious beliefs, along with your experiences of pleasure and pain." (p. 3)

Jesus knew this, whether by keen insight into the human condition or by a holy intuition. The mind is a powerful blob of cerebral matter which controls not only body and chemicals but emotion and relationship. Jesus knew that what we think and what we believe influences the way we act. What we take into ourselves, whether food, ideas or data, in and of itself, does not pollute the mind. It is what we do with these, how we process these, and how we act them out—in other words what comes out of our body—that determines our character and relationships.

Mind over matter is more than just a colloquialism; Jesus knew it to be an important aspect of healthy living, not only for oneself but for the community and family and relationships in which one lives as well. The way we perceive people will influence the way we treat them. If we like someone, we cut them a lot of slack when they do things we don't like. If we dislike someone, we tend to nit-pick at the smallest things that irritate us because we are predisposed to dislike anything they do, giving rise to jealousy, anger, malice and prejudice, among other things, that defile us. Few things that go into the mind are in and of themselves bad. But what we do with them, how we rearrange them, what meaning and value we give them, determines the way we use that information for good or ill.

In this passage, which is reflective of the words Joe spoke of last week in Peter's vision of the unclean things in the net, Jesus says that it isn't only what we do that defiles us; it is also our evil intentions, what comes out of our mouths as slander or gossip or name-calling as a result of the unhealthy thoughts of the mind. Minding the mind about such things is good for yourself, because to harbor malice and grudges, to be greedy and selfish, to brood over angers and judgments does more harm to us than to the person with whom we are angry. Minding the mind about such things is good for a society because it keeps relationships healthy and in communion.

Our responsibility as people of faith is to rearrange what we take into our brains in light of Jesus' teachings about justice and hope, about joy and caring, about giving and receiving, about loving and including. Time for meditation and reflection, just sitting in the swing or watching the clouds go by is helpful. Aligning ourselves with others in a faith community who share the same values assists our minds in focusing on what is helpful and good, so that what comes out of our mouths and our hands and feet and attitude builds up rather than tears down.

Worship is a way of reminding us to stay on track. The ritual we reenact each week reinforces and refocuses, anchoring us in the values and mindset of the One who came to save us from the powers that would otherwise beset us. Constant reminders get us back on track before we get too far off. Communion, at this table with bread and wine, and with one another in conversation and friendly connections, realigns our minds with God's purposes.

The Confirmands could have preached this sermon today. In fact, they do; for if you read their statements of beliefs, you will see that they value integrity in thought and deed; they value learning about God in the world around them as well as at church; they value equality among people; they value the things that Jesus taught. They are learning that what comes out of their mouth, what goes on in their brain, and what they do for others are important for living a life of joy and fulfillment.

A mind that is free of resentment and distress is a mind that produces healing endorphins in the body. A mind that is free of anger is a mind that builds up the body's immune system. A mind that is free of malice and prejudice is a mind that informs the tongue to speak helpful and encouraging words, even to those who wrong us or those whom we don't like. A mind that is free of greed and envy is a mind that motivates the hands to reach out in kindness and joy to help another in need. A mind that does not give free rent to narcissistic pride and arrogance is a mind that is free to love. A mind that is stayed on Jesus' teachings of justice and love is a mind that builds not only the body connected to it, but the body of Christ and the community of the world as well.

We come here week after week, year after year, not because we always learn something new, but because we know that by being here routinely, eating and drinking, crying and laughing together, singing and praying in the company of the faithful, we stay our minds on things of value, **re-minding** ourselves of the things we value most, realigning our thinking and feeling with what God wants. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, creator of the universe, Force of life deep within all living things, Ground of Being upon whom we build the joy and fulfillment of our lives, we bring to you are gratitude for life's bounty and its richest blessings.

We come to you because we have minds that seek to understand the meaning of our existence. We choose to believe that life is a process with direction and purpose, rich in pleasure and delight because we find you to be the Power behind all, the Meaning running through all, the Purpose that permeates all. We thank you for minds to contemplate life in all its fullness.

We come to you because we are workers, believing that what we do in this life has some value for the good of all. Week after week we gather in this place to refocus our priorities so that what we do will emanate from what we believe you would have us do.

We come to you because we are people seeking to live by faith. We have learned the hard way that systems--whether governmental, religious or social--can disappoint us. Give us faith to persevere when systems fail us and courage to empower the systems to include and care for everyone.

We come to you with our wrongdoing, seeking ways to make amends for the things we have done that have been harmful and the things we didn't do that would have been helpful. We pray for strength to change our ways and the assurance that even when we fail, we are valued for who we are, not what we do or do not do.

We come to you with our sufferings and pain. We seek vision to understand and patience to endure life's tragedies. We need power not only to bear but to allow our hardships to build stronger character. Without divine power from deep within our souls, we are undone with dismay or embittered with resentment. We come seeking the comfort only you can give.

We come asking your blessing on these confirmands. May their experience in this congregation nurture them in the years ahead, that having found value in community and in relationship with you, they will be grounded in love and hope. As we eat and drink, sing and pray together we may be stronger in faith and better able to serve as the body of Christ for peace and justice, hope and love. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

(Adapted from *A Book of Public Prayer* by Harry Emerson Fosdick)