

**Reflection**  
**August 29, 2021**  
**The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson**

Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

*There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come...*

After reading this appointed Gospel lesson a few times, I am left with the question, "What are my insides like?" And, "I wonder what your insides are like?" Dr. Howard Thurman sees it this way: (In case you haven't been here at Epiphany *for a minute*, Dr. Thurman was mentor and spiritual guide for leaders of the Civil Rights Movement of the 60s.)

*The dominant trend of a (person's) life may take on the characteristics of a canal, reservoir or swamp. There are some lives that seem ever to be channels, canals through which things flow. They are connecting links between other people, movements, purposes. They make the network by which all kinds of communication are possible. They seem to be adept at relating needs to sources of help, friendlessness to friendliness. Of course, the peddler of gossip is also a canal. If you are a canal, what kind of things do you connect?*

*Or are you a reservoir? Are you a resource which may be drawn upon in times of others' needs and your own as well? Have you developed a method for keeping your inlet and your outlet in good working order so that the cup which you give is never empty? As a reservoir, you are a trustee of all the gifts God has shared with you. You know they are not your own.*

*Are you a swamp? Are you always reaching for more and more, hoarding*

*whatever comes your way as your special belongings? If so, do you wonder why you are friendless, why the things you touch seem ever to decay?*

*A swamp is a place where living things often sicken and die. The water in a swamp has no outlet.*

*Canal, reservoir, or swamp—WHICH?”*

A surprising number of people over the years have told me that they think that they are bad people. These are people whose behavior is honest and fair, are good neighbors, friends, and family members, and are the kind of people who go out of their way to help others. Still, they believe that they are bad. They explain this by saying that although they may behave morally, they are evil inward, in what they see as their true, authentic self. They understand their good, kind behavior as just a pretense. They think they are actually very bad because they sometimes have bad and aggressive thoughts and emotions. that show who they really are. They think if they are not completely good, if they don't always wish only good for everyone, they must be terrible people. For them, it's all or nothing. "Welcome to the human race," I want to say. Much of this these self-attributions of evil are simply based on wrong presuppositions. Truth is, we humans are complex creatures. As I see them, it would be good if there were more people in the world who are as good as they are. But it is true— it is from within, not from the outside, from the human heart, that we are shaped and formed.

Early in my adult life I recognized that although I appeared calm on the outside, I was a mess on the inside. Like a duck sitting on a pond, smooth above the water, but paddling like hell underneath—just to stay in the same place. I was determined to change all that.

Spirituality is the process of transforming the heart, opening the heart, making the soul a channel and a reservoir of hope and courage and love. So maybe you think I appear a little crazy on the outside, but, God willing, my resources are deep and calm underneath.

What about the swamp? How quickly darkness descends in a swamp. How can we not stop and reflect on the rapid collapse of Afghanistan after two decades of military intervention. I don't mean concerning strategies and policies and politics—but regarding the “inside and outside lesson.” Today's gospel underscores that it is what's in the heart that determines outcomes—whether it be on the inside of an individual or the inside of a nation. Classified assessments by American spy agencies over the summer painted an increasingly grim picture of the prospect of a Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and warned of the collapse of the Afghan military. Then *Al Jazeera* reported:

*Ousted Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, fled his country as its capital Kabul was being overtaken by Taliban fighters....*

The Taliban were able to declare near complete control of the country within 10 days of seizing their first provincial capital. President Biden's assessment?

*We could not provide them with the will to fight for [their own] future.*

It's the inside that determines outcomes.

Jesus teaches that a relationship with God has nothing to do with the externals—what kind of food or drink is consumed, or what kind of outward rituals are performed.

The life of the Spirit, is from deep within the human heart. Priorities are set and choices are set from the inside out—for good or for evil. It is said that the longest distance there

is, is from the head to the heart. Spirituality is the process of transforming the heart, opening the heart, cleansing the soul—making the soul a channel and a reservoir of hope and courage and love.

A piece of good advice I was once given when my heart was full of unrelenting anger toward someone—a swamp— was to ask another person to pray for the offender for me, to forgive the offender for me, since I was so stuck. It breaks the paralysis, opens the flood gates, lets the cleansing waters flow.

We humans are complex creatures. Thank God for prayer, for forgiveness, for each other, and for grace in Christ.

AMEN.