



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

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Sunday, September 3, 2006
The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

*Choral Eucharist
at 11am*

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector
on
Saint Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
Ephesians 6:10-20
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DRESSED FOR WORK

The things that come out of a man are what defile him.

Put on the whole armor of God.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

While taking my vacation on rustic Monhegan Island, Maine, this past July, I read a book entitled *SuperFoods*, which I used as a kind of reading in between the novels and non-fiction books I was reading. *SuperFoods* is about those foods, such as broccoli, blueberries, yogurt and wild salmon (and even tea) which conduce to good health and may even assist the body in contending with such issues as cholesterol and cancer. I enjoy these health books and the way they fortify the common sense about eating that many good mothers try to teach their children. We are, as the saying goes, what we eat. So let's make it wholesome and healthy.

What our Lord says this morning in Saint Mark's Gospel in his controversy with the Pharisees about cleanliness seems to go 180 degrees in the opposite direction: "There is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him... For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man." In other words, a person can eat wholesomely and healthily, can maintain a regimen of exercise, and have good physical checkups with the doctor; and that person spiritually can be almost a perfect demon. I say almost, because the body itself is good, and thereby registers against spiritual wickedness emanating from the heart and animating the soul. It is because of the body's essential goodness that we can have lie-detector tests.

Jesus' teaching is straightforward, powerful, and understandable. Defilement is not an external matter of ritual or dietary purity (important as rituals and diets may be), but rather cleanness or uncleanness is an issue of the inner person, what we call the mind, the heart, and the will. Good will is clean; ill will is unclean. When the inner person is possessed by anger, pride, lust, envy, or covetousness, it is, in a word, bad, and the person expresses himself or herself in such activities as hostility, hurtfulness, theft, gossip, slander, and other behavior which Jesus generally calls wickedness or foolishness. But when the soul intends and determines to will the good, it is open to the cleansing of grace and expresses itself in terms of kindness, justice, generosity, forbearance, self-control, and mercy.

Today's well-known passage from Saint Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians picks up precisely on our Lord's point in today's Gospel. Paul tells us that having and maintaining a good will is a matter of perseverance in resisting evil, a daily matter of repenting when we fall into sin and choosing to return to the Lord. He reminds us that we are not struggling against flesh and blood (our own or others), but rather against *spiritual powers and principalities of darkness* which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God, including, especially, ourselves. Paul then likens the preparation for each day's challenges as if we were dressing like a knight for battle, donning the "whole armor of God," wearing the girdle of truth and the breastplate of righteousness; feet shod with the gospel of peace; protected by the shield of faith against all the fiery darts of the evil one; covered by the helmet of salvation and brandishing the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.

Over the years I have come more and more to appreciate the profound truth and good counsel of these words. I have collected cherished prayers that I say regularly in the morning before entering the scheduled and unscheduled challenges of a day. I sign myself with the sign of the cross, and I look at a cross or, better, a crucifix, which reminds me that God in Christ has gone to infinite depths to redeem and purchase me from sin at the cost of his own blood. I recommend myself to the Lord's protection. I ask for the prayers of Christ's holy mother and the saints. I pray that the Holy Spirit will surround and protect me, and that the good angel will lead me through the day and prompt whatever is good. I pray that if in my weakness I slip or sin, the Lord's loving-kindness will quickly correct it and blot it out. I pray that I may run the Lord's errands and help advance his Kingdom in even the most trivial, common and mundane tasks and encounters of the day, and that I will be alive and not dead to the presence of God's providence in any person, place, or circumstance. I pray that the day, and my life, will have a Christian close and be commended to the grace of Christ our Lord and God. I have made these devotions a cherished habit, because when I was ordained I promised (as all priests promise) that I would do them, and because I know they work. They do not take long, perhaps a few minutes some mornings, but they are vital to me. When I neglect them, I have a sense of having left myself open and vulnerable in a bad way, that is, in a careless and slothful way, to spiritual uncleanness and danger. Or, as Paul would say, when I neglect them I am not properly dressed.

I also know, in talking to other priests, as well as many lay people, that I am far from alone in such practice. Here this morning we have a church in which are gathered many Christians of good will, who are determined to persevere, many of whom have gracious devotions of their own. They practice their different forms of devotion, with words and without, in many different times and places, according to their own gifts, needs and life-settings. In so doing, they all put on the whole armor of God, as the apostle counsels.

In today's Holy Communion, the truths of bodily health and spiritual cleanness come together and are one. We receive the Body and Blood of Christ. As food, it does come from outside us. But Christ's Sacrament, given by him and received by us, does not contradict what he teaches in today's Gospel. Far from it. Let me quote to you from the Book of Common Prayer on this: "The Wicked, and such as be void of a lively faith, although they do carnally and visibly press with their teeth...the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ; yet in no wise are they partakers of Christ: but rather, to their condemnation, do eat and drink the sign and Sacrament of so great a thing." How then do we partake? "The Body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten...only after an heavenly and spiritual manner. And the mean whereby the Body of Christ is received and eaten...is Faith."¹ And so Jesus has brought us full circle, so that in the very best way, we are indeed what we eat!

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

¹ Articles of Religion, XXIX, *Of the Wicked, which eat not the Body of Christ in use of the Lord's Supper*; Article XXVIII, *Of the Lord's Supper*.