Pentecost 15 – September 1, 2024
Text: Mark 7:14-23
Theme: We Need the Antidote to Sin

Danya and I enjoy watching new parents and talking with them because it reminds us of the journey we took with our kids. I think the hardest thing to overcome, as a parent, is the nagging idea that you can prevent all evil and hurt from ever touching your children if you just do all the right things and enforce all the correct rules. As I have told many of you before, when Neal was born, we had a "no toy gun rule" because we did not want him ever thinking that a firearm was a toy. At some point he was using his broccoli at the dinner table to shoot his brother and we gave up. Boys will be boys no matter what. We also had a "no television rule" to prevent him from being lulled into a stupor in front of a screen instead of using his imagination and creativity to entertain himself. That worked well until we figured out that a Disney movie bought us two hours of relative peace.

The point is that most parental rules are not bad in and of themselves. But they are often focused on the wrong place. Jesus tells us that it is not things that come into us from outside that defile us, but rather, the things that defile us are things that are already there within us that come out of us.

Like many of you, I played with toy guns my whole childhood and never once mistook a real gun for a toy. As I grew older and had the opportunity to shoot real guns, I did not handle that real gun like a toy. I also grew up watching TV although there were only 3 or 4 channels depending on where we were living at the time so the selection was pretty dull most of the time. Sunday night was the World of Disney, Monday night was Gunsmoke and the Thursday was the Waltons. During the day, there were boring game shows and soap operas. Yet I was not corrupted by TV. I loved to read books, build forts in the woods, and create huge G.I. Joe adventures all over the living room. Yet still, I faced the corruption that was within me. Even without cable, cell phones and video games, I managed to develop impure thoughts, angry outbursts and secret lies.

It turns out that it is quite impossible for adults to protect their children from the corruption of sin. It was already in them from the moment they were conceived and there is nothing we can do about that. What we can do is counteract the corruption with the antidote. If you were bitten by a rattlesnake, spending all day blaming yourself, your friends or even the snake will get you nowhere but dead. What you need is a shot of antivenom and that will generally cure you if administered in time. It is the same with sin. The antidote must be administered in time.

That antidote is Holy Baptism. Baptism infuses the person with the Holy Spirit and the grace of God. It is the antidote to sin. But unlike snake venom that is fully conquered by the antivenom, sin is a corruption that goes deep into the soul and takes root there until the day of our death when only God himself is able to remove it, and then, He cures us for all eternity. Until that day, we fight the sin infection. After baptism, we begin to teach everything Christ commanded us. We cannot protect people from cancerous sin but we can fight it and keep it in remission with the Word of God. Finally, we nourish ourselves with the "medicine of immortality." That is what the Church Father, St. Ignatius of Antioch, called the Lord's Supper. That is why I take the Lord's Supper to those who are sick and homebound. They might be taking 20 or 30 medications but the only medication that truly heals them is the medicine of immortality.

Psalm 51, our Introit for this morning, asks God to do the following:

"Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit."

Psalm 51 describes an ongoing process for us. Conquering sin in our lives is sadly not one and done. I wish it were so, but it is not and wishing it were so won't make it so. Neither will sticking your head in the sand and hoping that the Devil who is prowling around, seeking your soul, won't notice you. This is why once a month in worship is not enough. Sometimes people get angry with me because I nag them to be in Church more often. First of all, isn't that one of the things God called me to do as a pastor? Would you have any confidence in a pastor who didn't think coming to worship was a big deal? Second, I don't want to see any of my people spiritually die. You might think you are doing fine but I can guarantee you that if you are not getting regular boosters of the antidote, you are dying. Faith is never static. It is always either growing or dying. We need a daily infusion of the Word of God and a weekly infusion of the Lord's body and blood. No moralistic or pietistic rules like "no guns" or "no TV" will be enough. Proclaiming yourself a "good person" who just doesn't need the Church, will lead you straight to Hell. Only the pure grace of God carried by the Word and the Sacraments will be enough to keep our faith strong, our souls healthy, until the last day when the Great Physician will completely heal us and we will continue our eternal life fully healthy because we have been fully healed.