Welcome back to Mark after five weeks in John 6 where we gave lots of attention to abiding in Jesus, and being taught that God is our source. For a Jewish person in the first century making God their primary source would not be an issue. But, as we all know, we live in the 21st Century, and frankly, we are a culture who may need to be reminded that God is our source for living life.

The author of Mark writes in short, urgent, immediate, and to the point language. Mark will not let you ponder for too long whether or not your behavior models the life Jesus would have us live. The author of Mark will certainly not let us off the hook in regards to our behavior or how we believe in God. Nor will Jesus. Jesus, through the eyes of Mark, becomes an urgent voice crying out to us, that we need to examine our own hearts and minds. Our actions, in other words, matter.

It’s almost as if Jesus is saying, “No one can hide behind the words in Scripture to help them look nicer than they really are, their life will demonstrate their true character, regardless, on whether they are a teacher, nurse, politician, pastor, or firefighter. How we act tells the true story on what kind of a person we truly are to the world.

 Our quick Facebook posts show how kind or judgmental we can be when responding to another person’s comments. Our impatience with slow driver’s cruising down 2nd street can show a heart filled with self-indulgence. It is important to be honest with ourselves when delving into looking at our true selves, otherwise, we may just tell ourselves we might be having a bad day. And, yes, we all have bad days when we feel out of sorts or cranky. Jesus is not speaking to just one outburst of anger or evil action; he is pointing to a style of behavior that justifies acting out in anger as a way of life.

We’ve all heard and seen people justify why their outbursts of anger towards politics, vaccinations, or other people is their way of expressing their opinion. Jesus firmly says to the crowd, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: 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.”

I’ve never spoken from the pulpit about anger or evil, so I wrestle on how best to do this. After all, it’s not as if I haven’t acted out in anger myself, I’m not all that innocent. However, I still must look into my own heart as I ponder these words of Jesus “aren’t the evil intentions Jesus lists in the Gospel of Mark, like, fornication, theft, murder, avarice, deceit, envy, and slander point to a heart that has become so angry that evil becomes a way of life. The Jewish leaders may be giving Jesus a hard time by pointing out how the disciples are not washing their hands before eating, but their motives go deeper, much deeper, they are angry with Jesus. Anger burns in their hearts.

And if you need further proof outside of Mark, here’s where the Epistle of James can come alongside the gospel lesson to give us the language to talk about this essential mark of discipleship. What we say and what we do are not separate from who we are. Period. Our words and our actions are indeed windows through which to view our hearts.

This is a “come to Jesus” text. That is, if you expect to follow Jesus, then this will demand an examination of yourself, your true intentions, your true beliefs, and on what you stake your relationship with God to be. James 1 says, “For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like” (James 1:23-24). Perhaps, we all need a bumper sticker to say, “What’s in my heart today?”

Here’s the funny thing. So many of those who think that their words and actions are worthy of our praise do not understand that it’s their character we reject. Yet, at the same time, we spend a lot of energy saving persons, redeeming persons, lifting up persons whose words and actions damage and demoralize and demean. We posit, “They didn’t really mean it. They didn’t know what they were saying. They had a bad childhood.” Well, they probably did. Yet, none of these reasons justifies a life of unrestraint toward our neighbor.

Because those who are allowed to have a public hearing need also to accept the accountability and responsibility that comes along with such privilege. That includes everyone, especially preachers, and anyone who feels justified to post their judgment on Facebook. We must learn to measure our words, and examine our hearts for the anger we hold inside ourselves. Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah, “This people honors’ me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”

You may be asking right now, what’s the good news in all of this? It’s an important question because it exposes just how uncomfortable and truthful this passage from Mark and James really is. We desperately want to hear good news when we are called out for who we are, but, there are times when we have to name the specific human brokenness under which we live and that Scripture names. Otherwise, forgiveness, absolution, good news, Gospel, God’s promise becomes as bland as the promises we now hear from politicians.

What’s the good news for this week? All of these texts articulate how hard it is to live what we believe, to speak our truth with kindness, to be willing to bring forth in our words and our actions what is in our hearts. And, the most difficult thing to hear, is when our friends tell us that we need to change our ways. That’s why we need people around us who will tell us the truth when they see a disconnect between who I am and what I am saying and doing.

That’s why we need God breaking into our world. Isn’t that one reason why we come to church each Sunday, so that these words from Scripture will penetrate our hearts and minds to mirror the love of God? What kind of faith would we then have if we didn’t take the Scripture seriously? A faith of fear. A faith of distrust. A faith of despair. Jesus came that we might have abundant life, and that abundancy must be measured from within us, and the manner in which we treat others.

And we leave with this plumb line to measure our actions. The Epistle of James says, “If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” Amen.