

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23)

We love to look at people and judge them on the basis of what we see. We looked at Lance Armstrong and saw a guy who beat cancer and won Tour de France titles. We saw Bill Cosby as a barrier-breaking comedian and father figure.

by [Dennis Sanders](#) in the [August 19, 2015](#) issue

As I write, our nation is debating the place of the Confederate battle flag. It began as a drive to take down the rebel flag at the South Carolina state capitol, following the slaughter of nine people at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston by a white supremacist. It turned into a wider conversation about the role of the flag in the public square.

Here in Minnesota, Wade Yarborough, a business owner from the suburbs south of Minneapolis, wrote a letter to the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. It's about his father, the flag, and an incident that took place in suburban Minneapolis in 1967.

Wade's father, who was raised in the South, was stationed at a local army base and then stayed in the area to raise a family. He would fly the Confederate flag every January 19—Robert E. Lee's birthday.

A mixed-race couple moved into the house behind the Yarboroughs. The couple wasn't welcomed by their neighbors, with the exception of one person: Wade's father. He befriended the man, who was African American. The two shared an affection for barbecuing with wood chips. Wade wrote that one afternoon a group of neighbors came by and asked his father to sign a petition asking the couple to move out. He refused, a move that ruffled a few feathers in the neighborhood. Sadly, a few years later the couple left the neighborhood anyway.

I'm an African American, and the Confederate flag certainly does give me pause. I know the history, especially the more recent history of states adopting it during the

civil rights movement. Still, Wade's story reminds me that just because someone flies the stars and bars doesn't mean I know what's in his heart.

In our Gospel reading this week, Jesus has to deal with the Pharisees again. These religious leaders are watching every move that Jesus and his disciples make, hoping at some point to catch them in some offense.

One day, the Pharisees notice something: the disciples didn't wash their hands before they ate. The Pharisees believe the law demands that people wash their hands, and here they have proof that Jesus and his disciples are willfully flouting the law.

"So, why do you let your disciples eat without washing their hands, as the law requires?" they ask Jesus.

Jesus tells the Pharisees that the prophet Isaiah was right about them: they are phonies. They profess God with their mouths, but—as *The Message* paraphrase puts it—their heart isn't in it. They are ready to flout the law when it suits them.

Jesus then turns to the crowd and tells them something that is chilling: it's not what one puts in one's mouth that matters, but rather what comes out of one's mouth. In *The Message*, Jesus is even more graphic: it's not what we swallow that contaminates us; it's what we vomit. For those with weak stomachs, it's what comes from the heart that matters.

We love to look at people and judge them on the basis of what we see. This person is good, that person is bad. We looked at Lance Armstrong and saw a guy who beat cancer and won seven Tour de France titles. Then we learned that he cheated his way to those wins. We saw Bill Cosby as a barrier-breaking comedian and father figure. Then we learned of the allegations of sexual assault. Not everything is what it seems.

Jesus always seems to be showing people that what is on the outside is not as important as what is on the inside. He befriends people like the woman at the well and the woman caught in adultery—people whom your mother might not want you hanging around, but whose hearts were open to hearing Jesus. He calls out the Pharisees because they present themselves as respected members of society. But Jesus knows their hearts and shows them to be less than upstanding citizens.

In 1987, Stevie Wonder released the song “Skeletons.” It wasn’t as big a hit as some of his singles from the 1970s, but it was classic Wonder in that the lyrics are all about modern culture. The song is about people telling and living lies and having their deception uncovered. Its music video presents people in a typical American neighborhood, living seemingly wholesome lives, but in reality carrying secrets—skeletons. The song begins:

Skeletons in your closet
Itchin’ to come outside
Messin’ with your conscience
In a way your face can’t hide

We can quibble about whether it was wrong for Wade Yarborough’s father to fly the Confederate flag in 1967 Minnesota. But on the day his white neighbors wanted to act to keep their neighborhood racially pure, he revealed what was in his heart: a willingness to befriend a black man when no one else would. And the neighbors revealed the bigotry in their own hearts.

How are we living? How are our hearts? Are we trying to live as God wants, or are we putting on a show? Are we the Pharisees or Lance Armstrong or Bill Cosby? Or are we Mr. Yarborough?