

Proper 17
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
Aug. 30, 2015
“authentic living”

Today’s Gospel is a pivotal point in Jesus’ ministry. But, it’s easy to miss the significance, if you don’t take the time to look closely at what’s going on.

We’ve had a five week interlude of readings from the Gospel of John, so let’s spend a moment getting back into Mark’s narrative. To this point, Mark’s stories have been of Jesus and his disciples on the shores of Galilee. Now they begin to move inland, into the more remote countryside. The ‘establishment’ – the Pharisees and scribes – has journeyed from Jerusalem to confront Jesus and stir up trouble. Remember that the Pharisees were already conspiring with the Herodians to destroy Jesus, and the scribes had accused Jesus of being in league with Satan. Today, as the Pharisees begin questioning Jesus, it is another tense encounter.

I would like to pull on two threads in today’s tightly woven Gospel reading: hypocrisy, or inauthentic living; and the heart as the source of intentional living.

In Jesus’ time, the heart was understood to be the center of human will and rationality. Emotions did not come from the heart, but other organs of the body. Anger stemmed from the gallbladder; fear from the gut. The heart was the core, and affected the whole being, mind and body. We hear variations on the phrase ‘a clean heart’ in psalms and other Hebrew Scripture. Jeremiah 4:14, *wash your heart clean of wickedness*, or Psalm 51, *create in me a clean heart*. A ‘clean heart’ expressed purity of intention, ethical and moral living.

The Pharisees seem to be concerned about a relatively inconsequential thing – whether the disciples wash their hands before eating. This is not about hygiene, but about observance of Mosaic laws and the purity rituals which had become part of the Hebrew tradition. Many – but not all Jews – followed these traditions. The Pharisees wanted to live in a holy manner, pleasing to God; to that end, they followed the Levitical purity laws for priests. The Pharisees avoided situations which might render a priest *ritually* impure – which included what they ate, how their food was prepared (think pots and pans), where it was purchased, even the people with whom they associated. Thus, lepers, women at certain times of the month, the man born blind because of his or his parents’ sin – were shunned. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the priest does not stop because touching a corpse would defile him, make the priest ritually impure. These rules of purity – the “traditions of the elders” as the Pharisees referred to them – had widespread consequences when expanded beyond the walls of the synagogue or temple. The purity traditions were not necessarily bad, and probably were life-saving in many respects. But, they were used to segregate and separate people; they were used as a source of judgment against neighbor and alien. Those excluded were considered inferior humans, disfavored or lesser in the eyes of God. The purity traditions drew social and cultural boundaries, but claimed a theological basis.

Sadly, we still have vestiges of these boundaries – blacks, hispanics, the disabled, deaf people, women – people who are treated as inferior, lesser beings. Racism is a prejudice born of perceived superiority and privilege; racism is a social, and not a theological, construct.

What's at stake in today's reading? When the Pharisees ask why some of the disciples do not wash their hands before eating, they are questioning whether the disciples are good Jews. Indirectly, they accuse Jesus of being negligent and attack Jesus' credibility as a spiritual leader because he fails to follow the rituals of the faith tradition he espouses.

An equivalent today – what if President Obama failed to rise when the national anthem was played? The press and politicians would have a field day questioning the President's patriotism, and on an international level that might lead to serious damage to his credibility as our country's leader.

Jesus turns the Pharisees concerns around. These purity rituals, he says, are human precepts, not from God. God knows what is in their hearts, and is not honored (we might add, not fooled) by these empty rituals. Jesus quotes Isaiah, '*this people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me.*' The Pharisees have misunderstood what God requires.

Jesus is not saying, discard the law or the tradition. But he is saying, look closely at what you are doing and why. The ritual washing of hands before the meal originated as a measure of thanksgiving for God's gifts. But, like many of the religious practices of the Pharisees, it became a rigid requirement devoid of its spiritual meaning. Which makes Israel acceptable to God: ritual purity, or the following of the commandments?

A good working definition of hypocrisy is 'a misunderstanding of what God requires of us.'

Something happens here every Sunday that might seem to you to be a ritual devoid of spiritual meaning. As we, the congregation, prepare for the Eucharist, the priest, the deacon and the Eucharist minister wash their hands with the *purell* which is kept up here on the side pews. That is a matter of hygiene. Why, then, when the altar table is set, does the acolyte pour water over the hands of the priest? This is a ritual washing recorded in our earliest detailed descriptions of the eucharistic rite (4th century), and there is no utilitarian reason alleged for it. It is understood to be wholly symbolic as a sign of the purity of heart with which the priest properly approaches the Great Thanksgiving. The priest prays silently or may say the words from psalm 51, '*create in me a clean heart o God and renew a right spirit within me.*' This ritual washing is a moment of the priest's private preparation to preside at the Great Thanksgiving. I invite you to mark that moment in your worship, and offer your own prayer for your heart's intentions as you prepare to receive the bread and wine.

Tradition is like a parent, a resource and a guide. But, traditions which have lost their holy

significance can make us rigid and arthritic in our worship. Traditions can erect barriers to worship, barriers to community.

Consider what you do and why, and what you don't do, as a matter of your own holy habits and practices. What is important to God? I would respond, those holy habits which deepen our sense of God's presence and power among us.

Do you share grace before meals by saying, (as more than one teen has said at my table with a wink) "grace" – or do you approach that liminal moment with intention of true thanksgiving to our Creator for the meal that is provided for you? Is that a moment of grace for you, or an empty ritual learned at your parents' table?

Here's another tradition to consider. We stand as the offering of bread, wine and money is brought forward to the altar. We don't stand because there is a hymn to be sung, though I have noticed that some in this congregation wait until cued by the music. I would like us to recover the spiritual meaning of this tradition, that we rise as one corporate body. We stand at that moment in our worship to offer *ourselves* to God's service in grateful response to God's love, and to offer our thanksgiving for the Eucharistic meal we are preparing to share.

Jesus uses the metaphor of eating to expand his teaching. Is the holiness of a person an inside-out matter, or outside-in?

We tend to think in terms of outside-in. 'You are what you eat'. Two of my granddaughters had supper with us last week. As we each took our first bites of the meal, thirteen year old Zara, announced, '*at nature camp last Friday we caught frogs, and cooked and ate them!*' She looked at her 7 year old sister Lael, hoping for a dramatic 'yuk' reaction, a point scored in the contest of sibling rivalry. But Lael smiled, raised her hands above her head and snapped her fingers as she said, '*so did that make you feel all jumpy?*' Outside-in thinking.

A perpetrator of domestic abuse blames his victim – '*if you hadn't been so mean to me, I wouldn't have hit you.*' Or, '*I was raised with the language of hate and name calling, my dad talked that way, so I do, too.*' Outside-in thinking, on a broader scale.

Listen to these verses from Mark as translated in Eugene Petersen's *the Message*: "*it's not what you swallow that pollutes your life, it's what you vomit – that's the real pollution....What you swallow doesn't enter your heart but your stomach...*" Mark 7:15, 18.

The graphic metaphor of eating isn't perfect, still it makes the point. Jesus offers a list (not all-inclusive) of evil things that come out of a person – theft, murder, greed, and so on– all these attitudes and immoral acts originate within you and make you less holy, less pleasing to God. Evil intentions arise from the heart, and spew outward, like vomit.

This is not an Augustinian theology that we are born evil or with original sin. Rather, Jesus says

we *choose* to do the evil we do. Which means, quite simply, we can choose *not* to do evil. We live an intentional life, driven by the heart.

The pivotal point. Jesus' pronouncement that there is '*nothing outside a person that going in can defile*' has far-reaching implications for his ministry. If there is no need to maintain the Jewish kosher regulations and practices, if Jews no longer have to worry about what they eat and how it was prepared, then they could sit at table and eat with Gentiles. In Mark 7:19 (a verse skipped over in today's reading), Jesus says directly that all foods are clean, tearing down a centuries old barrier between Jews and Gentiles.

When Jesus sends out the twelve, they are instructed not to take any food or money with them. They are to rely on the hospitality of those to whom they are sent. 'Keeping kosher' would have made it impossible for an observant jew to accept the hospitality of a gentile. After today's episode, Jesus begins a missionary tour within the gentile territories. Jesus' message is for the world, that all may know God's love and hope.

By tearing down the barriers of ritual and purity laws, Jesus invites us into the inclusive culture of God. To accept that invitation, we must distinguish and eliminate the cultural or tradition based boundaries which prevent us from seeing all people as children of God, and equal to us.

Only then can we present ourselves as a holy people living authentically as Christians.

Amen.

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