

Serving God, Not Tradition
August 30, 2009
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Now when the Pharisees with some scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they observed that some of his disciples ate their meals with unclean, that is, unwashed, hands. (For the Pharisees and, in fact, all Jews, do not eat without carefully washing their hands, keeping the tradition of the elders. And on coming from the marketplace they do not eat without purifying themselves. And there are many other things that they have traditionally observed the purification of cups and jugs and kettles (and beds).) So the Pharisees and scribes questioned him, "Why do your disciples not follow the tradition of the elders but instead eat a meal with unclean hands?" He responded, "Well did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines human precepts.' You disregard God's commandment but cling to human tradition." He summoned the crowd again and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and understand. Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person; but the things that come out from within are what defile." From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from within and they defile."

This is the Word of God and It Can be trusted.

Thanks be to God.

Sometimes our insight into Scripture can be enhanced by hearing a story from another source. On considering today's Gospel, I came across the following illustration. The illustration is as follows: A very poor holy man lived in a remote part of China. Every day before his time of meditation in order to show his devotion, he put a dish of butter up on the window sill as an offering to God, since food was so scarce. One day his cat came in and ate the butter. To remedy this, he began tying the cat to the bedpost each day before the quiet time. This man was so revered for his piety that others joined him as disciples and worshipped as he did. Generations later, long after the holy man was dead, his followers placed an offering of butter on the window sill during their time of prayer and meditation. Furthermore, each one bought a cat and tied it to the bedpost.

Tradition; what purpose does it serve in our lives and what place is there for it in our time of worship? This is what our gospel reading speaks to this morning. It has been said that, "Tradition is the living faith of those now dead, while traditionalism is the dead faith of those still living." Either way, I believe that tradition, without relationship is as fatal to our faith as our anonymous author's definition of traditionalism. Call it what you will, but Christianity without relationship is like faith without works; it is dead.

So this morning we examine Jesus' response to tradition; but before we continue, let us pray that God will bless our time and enlighten us with the power of His Word.

Let us pray:

O God who is greater than the most powerful forces in this world, enable us to be still & know that you are God. O Lord who answers out of the whirlwind of everyday life, breathe in us your Holy Spirit to strengthen, comfort, & guide us in the midst of the storm. O still, small voice, speak to us this hour, that we might become makers of your peace in our homes, in our communities, and in our world. We pray all this *In Christ Holy Name, Amen!*

In our scripture reading today, we find Jesus is in Galilee and some Pharisees and scribes have made the trip down from Jerusalem to join Him. Mark has already told us of the conspiracy to kill him, and as we all know, it is in Jerusalem that he will be put to death. So it seems particularly ominous that these people have come all this way to gather around Jesus at this time. It's crazy how some people just cannot be content in minding their own affairs that they actually have to go out of their way to find fault with others; much like the Reverend Fred Phelps and his followers or the school yard bully who makes his journey all the way across the playground just to kick dirt on someone's shoes.

So here we find that these leaders have traveled to Galilee and after such a journey what is it that the Pharisees have to say to Jesus? Do they look for some teaching that will guide them to live a better life? Do they seek some word of hope and encouragement? No. What they do instead is look to find fault with Him and in their attempt to do so, they lack the nerve to confront Jesus directly. Even though in their eyes Jesus had probably done more to violate many of their cherished precepts and worldly teachings than anyone else in their time, they instead attempt to find fault with some of his disciples.

What they choose to criticize in and of itself is not a huge failing of moral or spiritual consequence. Rather it is the failure of the disciples to observe a practice of human, not spiritual, origin. It is a pious custom at best. You see this practice is not uncommon when people are looking to find fault and they have very little to work with. They begin to nitpick. That is, the Pharisees, probably having little reason to complain about much else, draw attention to the Jesus' disciples eating with unwashed hands, and this scandalizes them. Hey, if the worst thing you had to say about Jesus' disciples were that they didn't wash their hands before they ate, then I'd say they were doing pretty good.

But there seems to be much more to it, at least for the Pharisees. The hand washing in question is not a matter of simple good hygiene. It is a ritualistic practice meant to wash away defilement, such as that caused by

touching something or somebody that has been determined by the law to be unclean. The Law of Moses mandated hand washing only for priests attending to their duties within the temple areas that were set aside as sacred. The Pharisees, however, extended the practice to other circumstances. They used this hand washing as what one scholar calls a "boundary marker" [Morna Hooker, "The Gospel According to Saint Mark" (Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), p. 445]. It was a way for them to distinguish themselves from the surrounding pagan population.

So these scribes and Pharisees who gathered around Jesus asked him why his disciples failed to keep the tradition of the elders. The Pharisees had placed their butter on the window sill without bothering to purchase a cat. They had become filled with their own opinions and speculations. They have categorized Jesus and his disciples as bad people, and all they can see is that they haven't washed their hands. Their focused condemnation absorbs their energy and as a result they have no energy left for anything better, anything more important. People had been transformed by the ministry and teaching of Jesus and His disciples. People had been healed, delivered from their transgression and saved from the pain and hurt of the world and all they can see is that they are eating with unwashed hands.

So, too, is it for our brothers and sisters of the LGBTQ community and those who have found a reconciled renewed relationship with God through the work of open and affirming ministries and denominations, like the

Ecumenical Catholic Church, the Metropolitan Community Church, the United Church of Christ, our own International Christian Community Churches and most recently the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Those who hold to a tradition of hatred and ignorance concerning their views of lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships still find themselves unable to accept that members of the LGBTQ community are able to receive Christ's love and are deserving of God's grace without the condition to change their innermost being. Jesus recognized these Pharisees and scribes, as many of us recognize most right wing conservatives today; as not simply a nuisance, but as examples of a spiritual danger that can threaten any one of us.

Jesus called together the people around him, the crowd, so they could hear the warning he felt compelled to offer them. In effect, what Jesus told the crowd was this: "Look out! Purity is not a matter of keeping external rules, without regard for what's inside you. Righteousness is not simply how you behave when people are watching. Just as you have an inner self as well as an outer one, keeping rules is not what it's all about. You must pay attention to the condition of your heart!"

What Jesus meant by heart here is not the muscle in our chest that pumps blood, nor our emotional connection to it -- the Valentine's Day heart, if you will. Jesus understands the heart in the Hebrew sense, that is, as the center or core of the person, the inner self.

He announced that the heart is where their problem lies. Their hearts, like the hearts of many Christians today, are full. Full with poisons that kill their spirits and the spirits of those they influence. Poisons brought about by hatred and bigotry supported by the teachings of church doctrine or tradition, rather than the Word of God. Teachings that go out of their way to find fault with a community rooted in acceptance, rather than to see the hope, good and love that resides within it.

Now let's be honest, we all have suffered. We have all experienced the pain and hurt that the world has to offer. We've experienced in our homes, in our places of business, our communities and even within our own places of worship. In our childhoods, our adolescence and our adult lives, we have faced challenges, heart ache and pain that have shaped the way we see the world and the way we react to others. Our biases and prejudices have been molded by our family, church and community experiences. But we must look beyond those experiences and forgive; not only ourselves but those around us who we allow to be objects of our frustration and misunderstanding. We must look to find favor with God and His Will for our lives, not allow ourselves to be blinded worldly teachings. If we continue to focus our attention on our reactions to the pain and suffering we each have encountered in this world, then how are we to see the path that God has laid before us? What we need is to empty and detoxify our hearts from the

poisons flooding forth from it. The problem is not external, and so it only reasons that neither is the solution.

What we require, at the center of our being, is for God to create a new heart. This needs to happen, not as a onetime isolated event, but continually. Over and over again, our overflowing hearts must be emptied, the poisons purged from our hearts and lives, so that the transforming grace of Christ can find a home in us. We must be set free from our own opinions and speculations, and become, like children, susceptible to focus on and marvel at the miracles around us and within us.

Christian discipleship offers us many ways for us to empty our hearts and become ready to receive the gift of transforming grace. Each of these ways must be used wisely if we are to have hearts that are free from the burden imposed by these loaded toxins. One way we are offered to stay focused is simply to, "major in the majors."

The scribes and Pharisees that surrounded themselves around Jesus in the gospel reading today lacked this ability. We major in the majors when our inner attitudes and our outer actions are based on an accurate discernment regarding what is central; when we fail to confuse what God has commanded of us with what we as man have deemed important.

All we heard from these Pharisees and scribes concerned a custom of merely human origin, something of small importance in the vast complexity of faith and life. Theirs is an unexciting complaint, one that hardly suggests

the adventure of the Exodus, the profound nature of God's promise to Abraham, or the need for Mosaic Law. In all that they could seek to know finding themselves face to face with God, the one thing they choose to focus on is a long way from the loving-kindness and mercy that Israel's Holy One showed to his people.

It is my prayer that it not become the same for us today! As Christians, we must not let peripheral matters take center stage. To prevent this, we must repeatedly challenge ourselves. We must turn time and time again to the majors of discipleship. These include the faith of the ancient creeds and the demands of the baptismal covenant, as well as the Great Commission's insistence that we make disciples, baptize, teach, and recognize Christ's presence among us. Yes, we would do well to take measure of ourselves as persons and communities that hold to the Great Commandment that we love God with our entire being and to love our neighbors -- all of them -- as we love ourselves. Our discipleship needs to be characterized by nothing less than the wonder, love, and praise we offer up both in reaction to and in honor of our God.

After years of succumbing to conservative tradition, the ELCA voted this month to change its ministry practices with people who are in committed gay and lesbian relationships. On August 19 of this year, the social statement "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust" was amended and adopted by a more than two-thirds majority vote at the eleventh biennial

Church wide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, meeting in Minneapolis, Minnesota. On August 21, the "Report and Recommendation on Ministry Policies" was amended and adopted by a majority vote at the same assembly. A portion of this document reads as follows, "While Lutherans hold various convictions regarding lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships, this church is united on many critical issues. It opposes all forms of verbal or physical harassment and assault based on sexual orientation. It supports legislation and policies to protect civil rights and to prohibit discrimination in housing, employment, and public services. The ELCA has called upon congregations and members to welcome, care for, and support same-gender couples and their families and to advocate for their legal protection.

The ELCA's decision to focus on the equality of God's love is among the majors in which our generous Creator invites us to major today. These are ways we are set free from a host of poisons that infect our hearts and prevent us from focusing on God's will for our lives.

Times, they are changing. Some believe these changes are infections that are sure to bring down God's wrath upon our nation and our World. These must have been the same feelings that the Pharisees and scribes felt in Galilee the day they encountered Jesus and His disciples. Just as they were wrong then, so too are those who live in fear of change today. We have a choice to make. We can continue to allow our pain, our prejudices

and our poisoned hearts to take center stage and be our driving force, or we can look to the Him who was and is and is to be for a focus that is sure to lead us on a path that produces life, bears fruit and encourages people to be their best, rather than keeping them oppressed, damaged and forgotten.

If washing your hands, obeying the Ten Commandments the best that you can every day, believing that you were really helpful to someone in need today, believing that you are nice enough to be considered for heaven, performing all of the good works that you can are paths to Salvation, then why did the Son of God have to come down here to offer Himself as a blood sacrifice for the sin of mankind?

While pondering this question, also consider this, what is in your heart? What are your acts? How have you responded to the hurt and pain of this world? Who is and what does Jesus mean to you? Jesus IS THE WAY! Learn to follow Him today; serve God, not tradition. Amen!