

Aug. 29, 2021

Gospel: Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Good morning! How wonderful to be kicking off a new way of worshipping together!!!

Let's get started. As Amy pointed out in her sermon last week, we have had several weeks of Gospel stories about bread. This week continues the theme of eating, but with a twist. It appears to be about eating without washing your hands. "[S]ome of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them."

Wait. Hold up. What about the CDC guidelines? 20 seconds with soap and water? I mean, even my three-year-old grandson knows to wash his hands before eating. He pulls a step stool up to the sink and puts his hands out as far as he can. He waits for a grown-up to turn on the faucet and dispense a dab of soap, then he rubs his palms together rhythmically while counting "one, two, three, four ..." If you remind him when he gets to six or seven, he'll even get the insides of his fingers and the backs of his hands before he finishes counting. If a three-year-old can do it, what's up with these grown men? Even though it would be many centuries before people learn about bacteria and viruses, Mark tells us that "the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders."

A little research has taught me that the Gospel writer is not talking about hygiene. He's talking about a specific ritual that made the hands spiritually clean. This ritual was an oral law, what Mark calls "the tradition of the elders." So let's look at that passage again. "When the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around [Jesus], they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is without washing them. ... The Pharisees and the scribes asked him 'Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders but eat with defiled hands?'"

Now, a question that starts "Why did you ..." generally makes the other person defensive. "Why" seems to carry an unspoken message: you should have and you didn't; you failed. "Why did you eat that cookie before dinner?" "Why did you bring the car back with an empty tank?" Even just saying this gives me that cringe-y, defensive feeling. And our instinct is to start justifying our actions. We had

a good reason – or at least, an understandable excuse -- and we're gonna lay it out. That's what I'm expecting next in this story.

Jesus, however, doesn't get defensive. He reframes the whole discussion. With that phenomenal memory of his, he grabs a few verses from Isaiah. "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines." In other words, what the Pharisees are doing is a sham. Just lip service. Not from the heart. And they're confusing human precepts – the tradition of the elders, which is just oral law – with actual doctrine.

I want to pause here to take a small detour. In our Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy, Moses says "You must neither add anything to what I command nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God." The tradition of the elders was literally added to the Hebrew law. And then the tradition of the elders – the oral law – seems to have taken on a life of its own, gaining in importance and overshadowing the commandments themselves.

That's not just a problem involving the ancient Pharisees and scribes. After Martin Luther published his ideas to reform the Catholic Church, the Pope demanded he recant, Luther refused, and the Pope excommunicated him in January 1521. Three months later, in April 1521, Luther was summoned to a hearing before the assembly of the Holy Roman Empire. This time the political authorities demanded that he recant what he had written. Martin Luther responded, "Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason – I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other – my conscience is captive to the Word of God." Boom.

I don't believe that traditions arise from any malicious intent. But history – and today's Gospel – tell us that traditions have a tendency to multiply and take on a life of their own. It's a form of mission creep. We need to ensure that our traditions are truly serving the mission, not the other way around. Otherwise, we run the risk that Jesus will say to us, as he did to the Pharisees and scribes, "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

Now we come to my favorite part of this Gospel, when Jesus stops talking to the Pharisees and scribes and turns to the crowd. Let's hear that passage again: "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."

The next few verses are omitted from today's reading but I'd like to include them. After speaking to the crowd, Jesus goes inside the house and his disciples ask him to explain further. "[Jesus] said to them, 'Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? ... For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come ... and they defile a person.'"

Note how Jesus addressed three groups of people: the Pharisees and scribes, the crowds, and the disciples. I think that's significant. The repetition suggests that this is an important question: What is it that degrades a person? It's not how they wash their hands or what they eat. What degrades a person is what comes from inside them, what comes from the heart.

Today's psalm and the letter from James tie in beautifully. James tells us: "Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless." The psalmist tells us: "Lord, who may dwell in your tabernacle? who may abide on your holy hill? Whoever ... speaks the truth from his heart." And back to the Gospel: "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." "It is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come ... and defile a person."

In other words, when we bring our hearts close to God, close to God's commandments, when we are not led astray by externalities, when we listen before we speak, then we can speak truth from our hearts.

Ok, that's all well and good, but how do I go about this on a practical level? I have a couple of ideas. First, I want to share a story from a recent column by Scott Stoner. He is associated with Living Compass, which Ron and Amy Cook introduced us to pre-COVID. The story goes like this.

You are holding a cup of coffee when someone comes along and accidentally bumps your arm, making you spill coffee everywhere.

Why did you spill the coffee?

Because someone bumped into you, right?

Well, no, not exactly.

You spilled the coffee because coffee was in the cup.

If tea had been in it, you would have spilled tea.

Whatever is inside the cup is what will come out.

Therefore, when life comes along and shakes you,

whatever is inside of you will come out.

So let's ask ourselves, What's in my cup?

When life gets bumpy, what spills over?

Joy, gratefulness, peace, and humility?

Or anger, bitterness, harsh words, and reactions?

We choose what's in our cup!

I love this image of something overflowing from us. It reminds me of the book, *How Full Is Your Bucket?* I'd like to read you a short excerpt.

Each of us has an invisible bucket [within ourselves]. It is constantly emptied or filled, depending on what others say or do to us. When our bucket is full, we feel great. When it's empty, we feel awful.

Each of us also has an invisible dipper. When we use that dipper to fill other people's buckets – by saying or doing things to increase their positive emotions – we also fill our own bucket. But when we use that dipper to dip from others' buckets – by saying or doing things that decrease their positive emotions – we diminish ourselves.

Like the cup that runneth over, a full bucket gives us a positive outlook and renewed energy. ... But an empty bucket poisons our outlook, saps our energy ... [Every] time someone dips from our bucket, it hurts us.

So we face a choice every moment of every day. We can fill one another's buckets or we can dip from them.

As I said, I love both of these images. To me, they capture the same message that Jesus spoke: It's

what comes out of us that can degrade us. We can overflow the joy in our cup, or we can spill out what our letter writer, James, called “the sordidness and rank growth of wickedness.” The power is ours. We choose.

One last reference before I close. In BTS’s song “Mic Drop”, Kim Nam-joon (aka RM) addresses haters who just spew out their negativity: “Baby, watch your mouth/ It come back around” My remix: “Need to watch our mouths/ Our words come back around.”

So. Let us remember today’s Epistle and “bridle our tongues.” Let us be “quick to listen, slow to speak.” Let our hearts be close to you, God. And then let us “speak the truth from our hearts.” Let us speak words of love, compassion, justice, peace, hope. “May the words of our mouths and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord”

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