

“That Which Defiles”

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

3 September, 2006

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Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, ²they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. ³(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) ⁵So 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?” ⁶He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

*‘This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
⁷in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’*

⁸You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

¹⁴Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand:

¹⁵there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

²¹For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²²adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

Prayer.

It is pretty obvious that Jesus is becoming a big deal. In today's Gospel lesson we return to St. Mark, where we briefly left a few weeks ago to touch on the Gospel of John. You will recall that Jesus had just started his Galilean mission, sending his twelve disciples out two-by-two to local villages to preach, teach, heal, and cast out demons. Jesus had just fed five thousand followers with five loaves and two fish, walked on water, stilled the storm, and healed the sick in Gennesaret.

Jesus was becoming such a big deal that he was starting to attract the attention of religious authorities from the denominational headquarters; the Pharisees and scribes from the Temple in Jerusalem. North they traveled, seeking out Jesus and his men. “Perhaps we can settle this quietly over lunch,” they probably surmised. They wanted to know what he'd done, by whose authority, and what his intentions might be for the future. Undoubtedly a report was expected

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back home in Jerusalem, such that an assessment could be made of the current status and a strategy could be created to deal with Jesus and his followers in the future.

The stakes were high; much hung precariously on the outcome of the Pharisees and scribes visit. Such was the setting for dinner this day.

The meal gets starts off on the wrong foot. It is hard to say if it was ignorance, cultural insensitivity, or an intentional act of defiance; but when the disciples, of diverse religious backgrounds, enter the scene and sit down for lunch, the religious authorities realize immediately that some of them failed to ceremoniously wash before eating. (It was probably the non-Jewish disciples who were the offenders). So 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?" (Mark 7:5)

Jesus' response is three fold; each of which is meant to inflame. First, he calls them "hypocrites," certainly not a strategy to win friends and influence people. A hypocrite is one to says one thing but does another. The hypocritical character that Jesus recognizes is the fact that the Pharisees and scribes hold up scripture to such high esteem, that they fail to follow it to the letter themselves.

A modern day example might be those who are Biblical literalist, who believe that the Bible is the inerrant word of God. The problem of Biblical literalist today is the same problem the Pharisees and scribes faced at the time of Jesus; it is to place yourself in the midst of the countless contradictions and to subject yourself to unbending legalism. John tells us that "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us;" (John 1) he doesn't say "the Word remained the Word carved in stone." Biblical contradictions aren't bad, rather, they communicate the fact that the Bible is the living, breathing Word of God, unveiling salvation history, that reveals the relational nature of God.

Secondly, Jesus responds in a way that exposes the terrible abuses that religious authorities had been able to inflict upon God's people. What began as God's laws given to Moses two thousand years earlier had been endlessly interpreted, modified, added to, and expounded upon into thousands upon thousands of lines of text ... all with the claim that every word was "*the tradition of the elders*" and held to the same status as the law of God.

Today, I believe this is a call to re-evaluate all those things we call "traditions" in our Church and our congregation. Traditions that perpetuate power, authority, control at the expense of the people of God need to be discarded like a worn out pair of shoes. Traditions that build today and give promise for God's kingdom tomorrow, well, that's a different story. As Wesleyan Methodists, we hold as core values Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience. This is the

“tradition” that John Wesley lifted up; the reapplication of past events that are effective today—to make new disciples, to reach out in the name of Jesus Christ, spreading his love and compassion, and to correct the injustices of the world to bring about God's kingdom in the future.

Jesus's third means of inflaming the scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem is his command of, and ability to quote, scripture right back at them. This is like telling a doctor how to make a diagnosis, telling a rocket scientist how to calculate a trajectory, or telling an accomplished business leader how to run their company. “Umbrage” may be too strong of a word to use, but I think it lends itself to this circumstance. Jesus gives umbrage to the religious authorities by quoting them from the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 29:13):

*“... these people draw near with their mouths
and honor me with their lips,
while their hearts are far from me ...”*

Never mind that Jesus offers a loose paraphrase, he references Isaiah, who is quoting God proclaiming judgement upon a people whose actions don't match their words, whose hearts have drifted from God, and whose worship has become rote.

*“The wisdom of their wise shall perish,
and the discernment of the discerning shall be hidden.”*

(Isaiah 29:14)

We like to maintain this sole image of Jesus as a non-confrontational, good shepherd that gently gathers children onto his knee, teaching them comforting Bible stories. This image has its place, but not today. Today, Jesus's words are comparable to overturning money changer's tables in the Temple courtyard. He is cold slapping the religious authorities in front of his disciples, exposing their hypocrisy and injustice, then using the occasion to teach the crowds:

*Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “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.”*

(Mark 7:14–15)

I learned at an early age, at a fraternity leadership development class twenty-five years ago, that good leaders “praise in public and scold in private.” But this is exactly what Jesus doesn't do. He isn't ascending into a leadership position. He is acting with the authority that only comes from being Divine, the Son of the Heavenly Father. Jesus is acting to address the injustices of organized religion that has run amuck and is out of control.

It isn't what I say that defiles you. It isn't my judgement, the judgement of the Leadership Council, or even the judgement of the District Superintendent or Bishop. What defiles you is what comes from your mouth and heart; what comes from your words and your actions.

Jesus is making a first century call to responsibility; personal responsibility that is a necessary compliment of the free grace of God. With freedom comes responsibility; being responsible for our words and deeds. ***It is not enough to be recipients of Gods grace, Jesus wants us to do something about it.***

God's grace may be free, but it isn't cheep. This implies that we are called to live responsibly, to practice what we preach, to unite our words and actions, to be in the buisness of discerning and acting upon the will of God in our lives, in such a way that is consistent with the example of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus retreats to the private audience of his disciples, he is very straightforward in his speaking:

“for it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come.”

(Mark 7:21)

All good things come from God and take up residence in our heart. But, so too does the evil of this world. To take assessment of your own walk with Christ, start first by examining your own heart. What is rooted within? Is our will more like the will of Christ, or like the will of the Pharisees and scribes? Are our words the words Christ would speak, or are they words one might expect to come from the devil himself? Are our deeds consistent with Christ's life and example, or are we behaving badly; accomidating injustice, tolerant of personal sin, and uncaring for others – just like those scribes and Pharisees?

It is not my place, nor the place of any other mortal, to judge you or your transgression. But it is my place to call you to self-examination, to outline the way of Christ and the cross, and to leave the rest up to you.

The Word of the Lord, as it has come to me this day. Thanks be to God! Amen.