

Sunday September 1st, 2024

Pentecost 15

Mark 7:1-23

“Create in Me A Clean Heart”

I am not sure which is worse, the characterizations it depicts, or the fact that it is an old groaner, but nonetheless, here is the story. A priest and a rabbi were eating together, when the priest started to tease the Rabbi. “Wow, this ham is really good” he said licking his lips. “I know it’s against your religion, but when are you going to break down and finally have some.” After a moment’s thought, the Rabbi responded with a smile and said “at your wedding!”

This little story is my attempt to lightly highlight a significant problem in our religious life, and that is, the continuing efforts to distance ourselves from our Jewish brethren. To think of any group of persons as “them” or the “others” is dangerous and leads to all manner of judgment and bigotry. This is especially true of antisemitism that sadly has been a persistent blight throughout the church’s history.

So much so that erroneously, many Christians believe, and even preach, that Jesus was somehow not even Jewish, and that he rejected all forms of Judaism. I came across a very powerful example of this when Amy-Jill Levine pointed out in her book *The Misunderstood Jew*, that we can see the denial of Jesus’ Jewishness every time he is portrayed on movie screens. Jesus is usually depicted as white skinned, blue eyed, and oddly enough, quite often with a British accent. Other actors in these movies depicting middle eastern Jews, are olive skinned, brown eyed, and with characteristic Jewish facial features.

I point you to this issue, because if we do not clean away our misconceptions about Jesus’ ethnicity and culture, we cannot hope to understand what is going on in today’s gospel lesson or much of the New Testament. Today’s lesson comes at a critical moment in the life and ministry of Jesus. Up until this point in Mark’s account, Jesus’ popularity has been growing exponentially; due primarily to his demonstration of mercy and power in the form of miracles.

After he was rejected in Nazareth, Jesus begins his journey of preaching, healing, and exorcisms. He also commissions his twelve disciples to go out on their own missionary enterprise with some marvelous results. Word of Jesus is now spreading far and wide, even to Herod Antipas the king, who speculates about just who this Jesus could be. Is he John the Baptist returned from the dead, or Elijah returned, or some other great prophet?

Then Jesus feeds the multitude, and the crowd relentlessly pursues him, even after he crosses the Sea of Galilee. In today’s lesson, we read that a delegation has come down from Jerusalem, revealing the seriousness of concern the who’s who of Judaism have over Jesus. As soon as they arrive, this delegation begins to look for some way to dismiss Jesus, or better yet, to discredit him. The delegation’s ritualistic awareness is so keen, that they notice that some of Jesus’ disciples eat without first washing their hands and washing their food.

They intentionally use the word “defiled” to describe the disciple’s behaviour. The word defiled is translated literally as “common”, and it means the disciples, by not washing their hands, have not set themselves apart for God, by making themselves ritually pure. Since the Master, aka Jesus, is responsible for his disciple’s learning and behaviour, Jesus must also be defiled.

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Now a clarification needs to be made here, which Mark ably supplies us. The delegation's criticism of the disciples, and Jesus, is based not on the Law of Moses, but rather on the traditions that were adopted over hundreds of years, to bring the worship and purity of the temple into the everyday lives of Jewish believers. In no way, shape, or form is this a passage about Jesus chucking away the Law of Moses. There is not one piece of evidence to suggest that Jesus ever abandoned his Jewish faith.

We know, for example, that Jesus kept the Sabbath, as we read, he was at synagogue, "as was his custom". Remember the man with the withered hand? We have no reference to him ever eating anything that wasn't kosher. In fact, his followers ate kosher food, until Peter had his vision in Acts 10. When told to rise, kill, and eat, Peter protests saying, "By no means Lord; for I have never eaten anything profane or unclean".

The same word "profane" pops up again, but the point is that had Jesus broken kosher food rules, surely so would have Peter. But what about the words in verse 19 that read "thus he declared all foods clean" are in parenthesis, because they are a comment not from Jesus, but from Mark, or some later editor. So, we need to be very clear here.

The issue the delegation raises is not about laws, or even purity, but about traditions that arise that take on a life of their own and are valued at a level that should be reserved for greater commands of justice and mercy. Remember again the man with the withered hand. "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" The main point being made here is that the call, and enforcement of piety, is dangerous if it supersedes matters of life, grace, and mercy.

Furthermore, the desire to enforce personal piety, can diminish the joy people are experiencing in the presence of Christ. The danger with stale piety, "the tradition of the elders" is that it can suffocate grace. This was the danger facing the Jerusalem delegation, and frankly it is a danger we all face, in every religious community that has ever existed. The religious leaders of Judaism were not the only ones with traditions of the elders.

That's the first caution I suggest to you. Can we stop bashing the Pharisees and Scribes and maybe Jews in general? These men were devout, followers of Judaism. They took their faith seriously, and although they may have gone off the rails by focusing on piety instead of faith, they really wanted, for the most part, to do what was right in the eyes of God and yes, humankind. These two groups laboured hard to preserve the scriptures, understand them, and apply their truth.

We also need to remember that Israel at this time was a besieged nation. For hundreds of years, they had been controlled by gentile nations who disregarded, and even tried to destroy the Jewish faith and culture. Under Roman control specifically, there was a deep residing fear that the definition of what being a faithful Jew amounted to, was being eroded. That to remain a Jew in these circumstances meant doing whatever you could to promote fidelity to the Jewish faith.

In even simple ways like washing your hands before eating, these religious men, sought to declare that God's way was true, not the Roman way. In the delegation's mind this leads to an even bigger issue.

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If I compromise on these simple matters of piety, like washing my hands, am I also risking offending God, and compromising any hope to eternal life. Remember the rich, young, ruler's question, "What must I do (emphasis on do) to inherit eternal life?"

It is a very real possibility that the concerns over the disciple's lack of piety, were raised out of concern for the eternal nature of their souls and maybe even Jesus'. We may be incredulous at such a leap of logic by the religious leaders of Jesus' day, but have we not experienced similar leaps of logic in our lives and in the church community? I was told a story one time by a parishioner of mine in Toronto. He told me about a time he and his wife were traveling on a holiday in the states and attended a large Baptist church.

The minister of the church on this Sunday, was using his sermon to rail on about the evils of modern life, and he mentioned the great evil of dancing. At the culmination of his rant, he said, and I quote, "I would rather see my daughter dead, than dancing". We are perhaps horrified by such words, but the point is that subtle, and not so subtle demands for piety, still reside in church families.

All of us have stories, of decisions made by boards or congregations, based not on how to meet pressing needs of ministry and care, but to preserve some sense of the sacred that has crept into mundane practices and things, and even rooms. I mentioned rooms, because one of our sister Baptist churches, had a problem. Its outreach to youth and children was so effective that they were being hampered in their work by a lack of space.

The obvious solution was a large parlour, you know the kind of space in older churches, with soft old chairs, carpeting, and fancy pictures and décor. Someone saw the obvious solution and suggested moving one of the youth groups into the parlour for their programs. It made sense, given that the space sat empty almost all the time. Have you guessed the reaction? Some of the older members were incensed that the kids might spill juice on their precious carpet or furniture.

That kids being kids, would not show the proper decorum in such a "special" room. The pastor at the time, told me that to these well-meaning people, the parlour was a sacred space. A place, historically, but not currently, where suited and elegantly dressed people sipped tea and ate cucumber sandwiches at Mission Circle meetings or funeral receptions.

It was not stated, but it almost seems as if the eternal nature of the soul of the people of that church was dependent on a stain free rug. That the appearance of piety was more important than ministering to kids. Just a reminder though, that just like the Pharisees, the guardians of the parlour do mean well, it's just that piety, or the expression of such, has taken precedence over greater matters. But Jesus goes further. He raises an example of how piety can be used to circumvent the law itself. Jesus points to the command to honour your father and mother.

This goes right back to the big ten commandments: the very heart of the covenant between God and Israel. The delegation knows this command very well, as does every Jew. Part of this honouring your parents comes from the fact that there were no pension plans in those days, so parents relied on their children to support them when they could no longer manage by themselves. This seems reasonable and was how most Jews understood the implication of law.

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Many, but not all, religious leaders looked for a loophole in their responsibilities to their parents, and so they declared their wealth as “corban”; meaning it was an offering to God. This didn’t mean they gave it to the temple, but rather, because they were doing God’s work, they were exempt from using their money to help their aging parents. The declaring of one’s wealth as “corban” was an abuse of piety. A twisting of the commandments, for personal gain.

Piety is still used to avoid compliance with the intent of God’s will for his people. Piety is used to justify, by some, the use and acquisition of all manner of the ridiculous. Very recently, Pastor Creflo Dollar (interesting name for this pastor) asked his church, and television audience, for 200,000 people to donate \$300 each to get (are you ready for this) the 60-65 million dollars needed to buy a Gulfstream G650 airplane.

What was Pastor Dollar’s reason for the luxury jet? Why to travel the world to preach the gospel. I guess flying coach was out of the question, when clearly the preaching of the Gospel requires leather seats, plenty of leg room, and the latest in all manner of electronic equipment. Pastor Dollar did say, however, that he would endeavor to find a gently used jet, if it was still up to the standards that ministering to the Gospel required.

One wonders how you make such a leap of thinking, but it happens all the time, from jets to how big to cut the communion bread pieces. I think the greatest problem with piety is that it is an outward display. It is always an effort to appear pure, but not necessarily be pure. No wonder Jesus stresses that what defiles a person is not what goes into the body, but what comes out. What defiles a person are the actions, words, and thoughts that emerge out of us.

The heart is the battle ground, not the church parlour. Actions of violence, thievery, and self-indulgence: begin with thoughts in the heart, not from eating with dirty hands. The reason Israel failed in their covenant with God, was not because of their lack of piety, but their lack of justice for the marginalized in society. More than a few times, the prophets wrote that God cares not one wit for the people’s sacrifice (which is piety) while widows, orphans, and foreigners are neglected and abused.

This situation reminds me of the old idiom that we are apt to “throw the baby out with the bath”. It also reminds me of one of my favourite stories about a woman who was hosting her very first Easter dinner for her extended family. She had purchased the required ham, and she was prepping it for the oven when her husband ambled into the kitchen and caught her doing something odd. Before she placed the ham in the roaster, she cut off both ends of the ham.

The husband was perplexed and asked why she would do that? The woman replied that cutting off the ends made the ham taste better, and it is what her mother always did. This idea sat uncomfortably with the man and when the family was gathered for the Easter feast, he asked his mother-in-law about why she cut the ends off the ham before cooking it. She replied that cutting off the ends made the ham taste better.

To which he asked, “Where did you get that idea?” “From my mother”, was the reply. Well guess who was at the other end of the table, but none other than Grandma. So, the man asked the grandmother, “Why do you think cutting off the ends of the ham makes its taste better?”

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The grandmother replied, “I have never thought that way”. He continued, “Then why did you cut off the ends of your hams before cooking them?” “Oh, I did that because it was the only way I could get the ham into my roasting pan.” Piety is like cutting off the end of the ham, thinking it makes things better, when it really makes little difference at all. Sometimes piety is a waste of time, energy, and resources.

Reducing our faith to demonstrations of piety does tremendous harm to a faith community. The “traditions of the elders” even in a Baptist church, can alienate people who desperately long to experience joy in their encounters with God in Christ. Traditions can also exclude many people who feel they don’t measure up to some sort of standard they imagine a pious Christian person should achieve.

There is no mystery here, nor was there for the delegation that came to Jesus from Jerusalem. The word of God has always been clear about what God wants from his people. From the prophet Micah chapter 6, and verse eight we read, “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” This is the true tradition we should all seek to honour.