

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

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 39-40

¹ Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, ² they 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; ⁴ and 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.) ⁵ 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?" ⁶ He 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; ⁷ in vain do they worship me, passing off human teaching as doctrine.' ⁸ You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." ¹⁴ Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." ²¹ For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²² adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, envy, depravity, slander, pride, folly. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they are what defiles a person."

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“Taking Things to Heart”

Rev. Amy Terhune

Show Jerry Seinfeld Clip from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f27Yzpz7cMg>

Only Jerry Seinfeld can turn NOT washing your hands into a comedy routine. But in our scripture lesson this morning, the issue of not washing hands is no laughing matter. The Pharisees take it very seriously. I know because they've traveled from Jerusalem to see Jesus. Jesus is in Galilee, which is about 60 miles from Jerusalem. And Galilee is what some might call “redneck” country. It's not where a sophisticated Pharisee from Jerusalem is going to vacation. No, they are there to get the scoop on this itinerate upstart preacher from the backwoods. I think they are there for dirt... metaphorically speaking. Which they find...literally. Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?

That's what they want to know? As this scene opens, we should recall that several rather crucial things have taken place. The 6th chapter of Mark opens with Jesus preaching in his hometown of Nazareth. He doesn't exactly get a hero's reception there. Then he goes out around the countryside preaching and teaching. He feeds 5000 people on a grassy hillside. He walks across the water. And in all the towns and villages where he goes, people recognize him and bring the sick to him. Jesus touches them and they are healed. Yet, in the light of these amazing miracles of Christ's ministry, the burning question on the minds of these pharisees is: why don't you all wash your hands?

But before we travel to far down this road, listen to what Biblical Scholar Charles Cousar writes: This passage “...has undergone considerable misinterpretation through the years, in part, because of a heavily jaundiced view of the Pharisees. They have most often been depicted as petty legalists out to feather their own caps and arrogant enough to think they can earn their way with God. The caricature has hardly left them with a positive press in most commentaries and as such, they can easily be dispensed with. But seeing them only in such a bad light is to miss the force of Jesus' challenge to an entire way of structuring life...” [from Charles Cousar et al, *Texts for Preaching, Year B*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) pg. 491.]

So, let's back up for just a moment and give them the benefit of the doubt. Let's suppose they're impressed by what they've heard—that they're curious about this man Jesus. And let's suppose that their question to Jesus is sincere, following along lines something like this: Jesus, you seem to be a man of genuine faith. You do good things for God's people. So why, oh why, would you glorify God by healing someone, and then turn around and disregard the history and traditions of your people; the practices that set us apart and help us understand holiness in a faithless and violent world?

Jesus' response is harsh, probably because he is frustrated. You see, all serious scholarly evidence suggests that the Pharisees were a devout group. Jesus was probably raised as a Pharisee. We know the Apostle Paul was a Pharisee. And we encounter in scripture people like Nicodemus and Gamaliel and Joseph of Arimathea – all of whom were Pharisees, and all of whom came to believe deeply in Jesus Christ. Jesus' issue with the Pharisees isn't that they're the bad guys. No, they're his people. His issue is that they are so close, and yet, so far. They defined holiness in terms of knowing and following the law. Jesus defined holiness in terms of knowing and following *the author* of the law. You see, the law has purpose – a good purpose. It is to help us know God, remember God, love and serve God. So, the Pharisees question Jesus' relationship with God when they seem him break tradition, when Jesus would instead have them evaluate their tradition in light of the good he shares through his ministry.

“For Jesus the food laws became critical arguing points to challenge the exclusion of Gentiles from the kingdom of God. A new identity for Israel was unfolding and it required a shift in understanding the purpose of the law. Table manners are not after all meant for banishing to the basement those who aren't worthy enough to eat. They are meant to help make dining a pleasurable experience for everyone. But the controversy over food laws persisted, and the early Church reflected tensions between Jewish and Gentile Christians that kept them from table fellowship together.

“Today, for us, other controversies keep Christians from coming to the table together. Opinions about policies having to do with genetic research, war, medical care, education, the environment, and human sexuality give us all the opportunity for violent disagreement, if we let them. Each of these areas of contention represents deeply held convictions about how we are to live. These convictions in part, tell us who we are. When they are challenged, we get scared. It feels as if our very existence is threatened. And it is fear, ultimately, that fuels the evil intentions of the heart.

What defines us? Jesus perhaps might have said, it's not so much that “you are what you eat,” but rather, “what's eating you.” [3 ¶s from Mary O'Gus, untitled sermon, excerpt in illustrations for Mark 7:1-23, www.sermons.com.]

The solution is to invite God to move from our lips to our hearts, in order that “what's eating you” may be transformed into “who's feeding you.” The heart is meant to be God's domain, where love can root out and extinguish evil and malice. The heart is where the truest parts of ourselves find life and breath. We need God in our hearts and not just our words because we're meant to live and love whole-heartedly. Half-hearted loving is shallow. Half-hearted living is empty. It lacks something we need, doesn't it?

So, this is not an indictment of tradition in and of itself. Jesus observed the traditions of his people. He goes to synagogue. He studies scripture. He attends festivals and religious observances. He shares the Passover Seder. He draws on the ancient language and imagery of his people. When he talks about being a shepherd, he's using language rooted in the kings and the prophets of old. When he talks about bread from heaven, he's drawing on images that come from Moses and God's deliverance in the wilderness. When he talks about a substitutionary sacrifice, he takes us back to Abraham and Isaac. What Jesus rejects is ritual for ritual's sake. And he lambasts utterly the use of ritual to exclude, demean, or demoralize another.

When ritual and tradition are at their best, they lift up, they bind humanity together across space and time, they remind us of who we are, ultimately drawing us closer to God. In just a few minutes, we'll share in a ritual called the Sacrament of Holy Communion. And I'll say the same words I always say, which some of you, if you're honest, probably think is pretty dull. Maybe it is. But I'll tell you the truth: it's the only way I get through it. Because communion is where we together encounter the living Christ in our midst. For me, this is about divine presence. And this is why United Methodists welcome everyone. Because rituals are not meant to exclude but to draw us closer to God and one another. And because love for one another is central to what we do, United Methodists long ago rejected ritual for rituals sake, at least in this case, altering things just a bit in moving from wine to grape juice in an effort to be sensitive and inclusive of those who struggle with alcoholism. Yet the sacrament loses none of its power or potency for the change, because ultimately, Christ is not experienced in bread or wine or grape juice, but in the heart. The practice of moving, touching, and tasting triggers the memory, but the heart allows the memory to live within and feed our lives.

The heart is the conduit of connection to something deeper than human love, something bigger than our individual life, something greater than our lips can articulate. The heart is where Christ is found to be real, and it's enough to drive me to my knees.

There is another way we can illustrate this connection, but it's a little strange, so hang in here with me. "There was something circulating on the Internet a while back about our transportation system—specifically, about how it came to be that the train rails in this country are precisely four feet, eight and one-half inches apart. Why such an odd distance? Because that's the way they built them in England. Why did the English build them like that? Because the first rail lines were built by the same people who built wagons, and they used the same jigs and tools that they used for building wagons, which used that wheel spacing.

"Okay! Why did the wagons have that particular odd wheel spacing? Well, if they tried to use any other spacing, the wagon wheels would break on old rural roads, because that was the spacing of the wheel ruts. So, who built those old, rutted roads? The first long-distance roads in England were built by the Romans for their imperial legions. And Roman chariots made the initial ruts, which everyone else had to match for fear of destroying their wagons and wheels. Since the chariots were made by the Roman Empire, they were all alike in the matter of wheel spacing.

"Thus, we have the answer to our original question. The distance of four feet, eight and one-half inches derives from the original specification for an imperial Roman war chariot. But why did the Romans use that odd spacing? Their chariots were made just wide enough to accommodate the behinds of two war-horses. So the ultimate answer to the question of how it was determined how far apart train rails should be spaced is the span of the behinds of two war horses. Here's why that matters.

"When we see a space shuttle sitting on its launch pad, there are two big boosters attached to the sides of the main fuel tank. These are solid rocket boosters, or SRBs. These SRBs are manufactured in Utah. The engineers who designed the SRBs might have preferred to make them a bit fatter, but the SRBs had to be shipped by train from the factory to the launch site. The railroad line from the factory had to run through a tunnel in the mountains. The SRBs had to fit through that tunnel. The tunnel is slightly wider than the railroad track. So, the major design feature of what is arguably the most advanced transportation system in the postmodern world is still determined by the span of two horses' rear ends. [4 ¶s from Internet humor archives. Cited in John Mason, *Believe You Can: The Power of a Positive Attitude* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 2004); as used in "How Many of Us Does It Take to Screw in a Light Bulb?" by King Duncan, www.sermons.com.]

Now, you make think that's laughable. But it's also insightful. It helps us make sense of roads and rails and rocket ships. 2000 years later, the span between two horses' rear ends still impacts our transportation system. And just so, 2000 years later, stretching across the dusty byways of history, the heart-changing, life-giving, soul-lifting, world-redeeming life of God made flesh in one extraordinary man—the span between a manger and an empty tomb—still impacts every cell, every thought, every moment, every fiber of my being. I am made holy not by how I practice my faith, but by what God does when I let him move in me through those practices. That God still chooses to work in the pain, the conflicts, the confusion, and the goodness of the human heart is, to me, mindboggling... and divine. Thanks be to God. Amen.