



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, SEPTEMBER 1, 2024
DEUTERONOMY 4:1-2,6-9; PSALM 15; JAMES 1:17-27; MARK 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

PURE RELIGION

Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23 *[When the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; 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.) 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?” 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; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’ You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.” 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.” For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.]*

My son Andy and his husband just returned from a Mediterranean cruise. Each day they posted new photos of their travel. We were surprised at what they sent us. Photos of churches and holy places; secular and religious — the Acropolis and Sagrada Familia; the Oracle

at Delphi and the monastery at Mount Athos. You get the idea. We were surprised because Andy and Brian aren't particularly religious. In fact, Brian is rather hostile to Christianity because, as a gay man, he has received some painful rejection from religious family members.

I understand and appreciate his pain. When we were debriefing their trip in person, I curiously asked Brian what it was like for him to visit these holy places. He said, “I think everyone is searching for the sacred, even non-religious people.” Not all would agree, but I would add that most people are searching for meaning, purpose, and something of ultimate concern. Many of us call this “the sacred.”

As I think of human history, I am aware of how complicated the human search for the sacred has been. In the name of the divine, we have created some of the most breathtaking art, architecture, literature, music, and ritual imaginable. We've healed, housed, fed, loved, and served each other. But also in the name of the divine, we have impoverished, tortured, colonized, enslaved, and decimated each other. We've murdered each other's children, forced “nonbelievers” to choose between conversion and death, and burned each other's houses of worship to the ground. This still goes on today.

In short, our relentless desire to seek, serve, appease, or placate the sacred has never been a benign thing. Religion has always had the power to elevate or ruin us.

To make us compassionate and creative, or stingy and small-minded. To grant us peace or stir us to war. If our past teaches us anything, it is that we dare not treat our pursuit of God casually; the stakes are too high. What we profess and practice when it comes to religion really matters.

In our Gospel reading this week, Jesus confronts a group of Pharisees who accuse his disciples of getting religion wrong. Specifically, the Pharisees ask why some of Jesus's followers eat their meals with “defiled hands” — that is, why they eat without performing the ritual hand washing expected of observant Jewish people before meals.

To our contemporary ears, the accusation might sound trivial. But the Pharisees ask an important question, a question that gets to the heart of what authentic religion is. Consider their context: they are first century Jewish people living in an occupied land, occupied by pagan oppressors. How are they to keep their faith alive against the backdrop of colonization? Amid religious and cultural diversity, how can they maintain their identity? Their integrity? Their heritage? How can they be Jewish in a pagan world?

The Pharisees' solution to the problem is to contain and codify the sacred. How can God's people best practice their religion among the surrounding pagans? They can create and maintain a purity culture — a culture that clearly delineates who is "in" and who is "out," who is clean and who is unclean, who deserves God's favor and who doesn't. They can practice the ancient rituals of their elders down to the last letter, as if tradition itself is the gateway to holiness. They can refuse table fellowship with the "unwashed" — the tax collectors, sex workers, and other morally compromised sinners. They can set themselves apart as God's righteous and holy people.

This is religion as fence-building. Religion as separation. Religion as institution for institution's sake. And Jesus — never one to mince words — calls it what it is. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, he rebukes the Pharisees, saying, "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."

It's important to note that Jesus doesn't condemn ritual hand washing in this story. He doesn't argue that all religious

traditions are evil. What he indicts is the legalism, self-righteousness, and exclusivity that keeps the Pharisees from freely loving God and loving their neighbors. What he calls out is their elevation of rite over mercy, heritage over hospitality, ritual over compassion. What he grieves is the Pharisees' compulsive need to police the boundaries of their religion, based on their own narrow definitions of purity and piety.

Again, it's easy for us to look down on the Pharisees, as if we in our enlightened modernity would never make their mistakes. But honestly, are we any different? Don't we sometimes cling to spiritual traditions and practices that long ago ceased to be life-giving, simply because we can't bear to change "the way we've always done things?" Don't we set up religious litmus tests for each other, and decide who's in and who's out based on conditions that have nothing to do with Jesus's open-hearted love and hospitality? I hear this especially in the political arena today.

So, what can we do? How can we discern whether our way of doing religion is life-giving or not? Jesus gives us this advice:

notice what comes out of you. Does your version of holiness lead to hospitality? To inclusion? To freedom? Does it break your heart open with compassion for those who are suffering? Does it lead other people to feel loved and welcomed at God's table? Does it make you brave, creative, and joyful? Does it facilitate another step forward in your spiritual evolution?

Or does it make you small, stingy, and bored? Fearful, suspicious, withholding, and judgmental?

Like everything else Jesus offers us, his confrontation with the Pharisees is an

invitation. It's an invitation to consider what is really sacred in our spiritual lives. It's an invitation to go deeper — past lip service, past purity, past piety. It's an invitation to practice what this week's epistle calls "pure religion." A religion of love for the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the outcast, and the enemy. A religion of trust in a surprising, innovating, and ever-creating God. The God of heritage and history, yes. But also the God of an ever-living, ever-changing *now*.



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