

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
29 August 2021

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

I have always been fascinated by rituals and the kinds of things people do to prepare for or to celebrate certain events. You know what I am talking about. You dress from head to toe in gold and purple, wear your lucky socks, pile the kids in the minivan and stand for hours in a parking lot drinking beer and grilling hotdogs as you watch and listen to a game on hand-held televisions. And Then, every time your team scores a touchdown you run around your chair seven times, or you kneel on one knee and cross yourself, or you offer a libation to the football gods. We all have rituals. At heart rituals are activities designed to mark an event as special and to set it apart from our common lives. Rituals distinguish events from other events. The contrast between ordinary and extra-ordinary, common and special, secular and sacred help us understand the importance of ritual. Examples of rituals are birthday parties; initiation rituals into Boy-Scouting or Rotary, etc. Rituals tell the world about the groups we belong to, the people we associate with, the culture we share, and the values that are important to us. Reciting the pledge of allegiance tells the world that you are an American. Making the mark of the cross tells the world you are a Christian. Wearing your Rotary pin tells the world you are a member, etc. Rituals help us determine who belongs and who doesn't belong.

In today's Gospel Jesus is interacting with a group of Pharisees and Scribes who are angry at him. Jesus and the Disciples are not following the rituals of faithful Jews when it comes to eating and drinking. The Pharisees and Scribes notice that Jesus and his Disciples are eating with defiled hands. Another word for defiled is "common." The common use of the hands requires that you till the land, work with all sorts of materials that would get the hands dirty, handle all sorts of ordinary things. Through ritual washing, something that was secular, common, or ordinary is returned to a holy status.

Pious Jews believed that things that were ordinary had the power to stain and defile things that were sacred. They took great care to ensure proper purification and ritual cleansing before using utensils for eating or drinking. It was the same with the hands. Great care was taken to ensure they were properly cleansed before eating, lest they stained the body and the soul of those eating and drinking.

Apparently, Jesus and his Disciples are not properly purifying themselves and because of this they are going against the tradition of the elders (v. 3 and 5) and they are eating with common hands (v. 2 and 5.) There are several sources from which the Jewish People learned the rituals that provided them a sense of belonging as a group and as a nation. Many of these rituals came directly from Holy Scripture. Books like Numbers have detailed instructions about the proper rituals to restore to holiness things and people

who for various reasons had become stained or uncleaned. We see the proper ritual for offering sacrifices, for dealing with sin, for consecrating a child after his birth, etc.

There are other rituals that come to the people not directly from Holy Scripture but from the teachings of wise Rabbis through the centuries. These writings are often referred to as the traditions of the “Elders.” Many of these were oral traditions passed from generation to generation until many of them were written in the Jewish Mishnah and the two Talmud (Jewish commentaries.) Apparently, the ritual washing that Jesus and his disciples were failing to do came directly from these oral traditions. This particular tradition may have started as the Rabbis reflected on Exodus 30:17-21 and other passages from the Torah or the Law of Moses. The passage says,

“The LORD spoke to Moses: You shall make a bronze basin with a bronze stand for washing. You shall put it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and you shall put water in it; with the water Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet... They shall wash their hands and their feet, so that they may not die: it shall be a perpetual ordinance for them, for him and for his descendants throughout their generations.”

The ritual washing related to eating could be an application of a priestly rule to the entire nation and to every occasion of eating and drinking. Something that originally started as a requirement for priests during liturgical celebrations, has become common practice for the entire people. According to a commentator, “The tradition of the elders was not an attempt to bury the commands of God in trivia, but to apply the Torah to every facet of life.... The suspicion, here as earlier, is that Jesus' behavior conveys -- at least to others -- disrespect for the law, threatening the whole Pharisaic construction and (in their view) the Jewish way of life.”

Even though their objections seem petty to us today, these rituals were extremely important for the Pharisees and the Scribes. By not following the rituals, Jesus was setting himself apart from the group, crossing the boundaries of what it meant to be a pious Jew and acting somewhat disrespectfully to the group culture of the day. Of course, we know that these are not Jesus' intentions, necessarily, but this is how he is perceived.

Now, the question is “Why?” Why would Jesus not do as others did and why did his disciples follow suit? I believe Jesus is making an extremely important point here today by not fulfilling the Pharisees expectations. Many in Israel had forgotten the initial intent of the Law which was to honor God and to forge a national identity for Israel as “The People of God.” The Pharisees had forgotten the real intent of the Law which was to help the people of God love and honor God with all their hearts, minds, and souls. For them the Law had become an arduous set of rules meant to pacify God, rather than a total orientation of the person's life towards God. There is a lack of nexus between their rituals and the internal inclination of their hearts.

Jesus quotes Isaiah to make this point, “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.” They and us are so concerned with rituals that we forget the purpose for those rituals. We forget that it is not what goes into a person that defiles a person, but rather what comes out of the human heart. Our hearts are like an episode of the TV show “Hoarders.” They are filled with junk that impedes our love of God and neighbor. It is in the human heart that we find all the resentments we have collected over the years, all our anger, our bitterness, our ambition, our idolatry, our disordered passions, our hatred for others and our self-hatred.

Rather than being so concerned with external rituals, the Pharisees should have been more concerned with the cleansing of their hearts. Jesus makes it very clear today, “There is nothing outside that defiles a person. It is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come.” The good news today, my friends, is that Jesus offers us his “Merry Maids” cleaning service for free. We are in such poor state that we cannot clean our own hearts. To clean our hearts, we need help from the outside. This is the truth of the Gospel. Through the power of his passion and resurrection Jesus comes into our hearts and cleans them out for us, if we let him. He is able and willing to take our pain, our wounds, our hurts, our resentments, and everything else in our hearts that occupies the space where God alone should be.

I invite you today, as I do almost every week, to abandon yourselves to God’s love and to let him liberate you from your guilt and your anxiety. Let him cleanse your heart through his blood freely poured for you. Only he can cleanse our hearts and give us the freedom we all need. And for this I remain extremely grateful!