

Priority: Mission

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for Friendship Presbyterian Church
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Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, 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.”

This is the word of the Lord
Thanks be to God.

The Mission Statement of the Friendship Presbyterian Church says that “As followers of Jesus Christ, assured of God’s unconditional love for everyone, we

strive to be an accepting and joyful community that centers upon worship, encourages personal growth, celebrates diversity, nurtures individual gifts, and moves beyond boundaries to share, through service, Jesus' love, compassion, and justice in an uncertain world."

This is a good mission statement, I think – well-thought-out, comprehensive, yet concise. It appears on the church website, in the newsletter, and in the bulletin. We keep it in front of us.

But do we focus attention on it? Or are we content to let it lie in the background - of our identity and our activity? Perhaps because it's fundamental to who we are and what we're about, we assume it's also universally accepted, understood and upheld.

But is it?

Our Gospel Lesson for today challenges us to question our priorities - in light of our calling to follow Jesus.

Some Jewish leaders from Jerusalem approach Jesus with a question, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" It isn't an innocent question, even if it sounds like one.

It's kind of like a state patrol officer asking casually, when he pulls you over for speeding, "Are you in a hurry to get somewhere?"

Yes, it's a question, but it's also an accusation, "Do you have an excuse for this apparently poor behavior?" And it's coming from someone who's been given the authority to enforce the law.

The Pharisees from Jerusalem are all about enforcing religious law. They're like the sheriff's deputy parked along the freeway keeping an eye out for anyone who may be bordering on lawless behavior. And this is exactly what the Pharisees are accusing Jesus' disciples of – lawlessness – because they don't wash their hands before they eat.

The practice of hand washing for the Pharisees is more than a habit of good hygiene; it's a purification ritual. It's a tradition to be followed to the letter so as not to offend the Law of God – to them, a sacred thing, a divine commandment of how to behave. For example, Leviticus Chapter 14 gives instructions on how priests are to treat a leprous person who *appears* to be healed. These are very

specific directions of what must be done before a person can re-enter his own community after suffering a rash. In part, the Law says, “The leprous person shall be brought to the priest; the priest shall go out of the camp, and the priest shall make an examination. If the disease is healed in the leprous person, the priest shall command that two living clean birds and cedarwood and crimson yarn and hyssop be brought for the one who is to be cleansed. The priest shall command that one of the birds be slaughtered over fresh water in an earthen vessel. He shall take the living bird with the cedarwood and the crimson yarn and the hyssop and dip them and the living bird in the blood of the bird that was slaughtered over the fresh water. He shall sprinkle it seven times upon the one who is to be cleaned of the leprous disease; then he shall pronounce him clean, and he shall let the living bird go into the open field.” This is just the first part of the ritual. It goes on. The leprous person must then wash himself, wash his clothes, shave all the hair off his body, and live outside his tent for seven days; then wash himself again, wash his clothes again, shave himself again, “and he shall be clean.” (Leviticus 14:2-9)

This ritual cleansing tradition is a big deal to the Pharisees! They try to follow the Law to its very letter. And they try to enforce it, as much as they’re able, among the Jewish population.

So when they come to Jesus asking why his disciples are allowed to eat with unclean hands, they’re actually accusing Jesus of sanctioning rebellion against God’s Law, which - to them - is like leading a rebellion against God. In effect, the Pharisees have come to equate *God* with their interpretation of Mosaic Law, as if they’re one and the same. Whether, conscious or unconscious, such a conclusion allows them to usurp God’s place and to be the ones who issue judgement on others.

Jesus calls the Pharisees hypocrites, quoting Isaiah, saying, “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” These religious leaders have stopped caring what’s in people’s hearts; their concern is only whether the letter of the Law is being obeyed. Essentially, they’ve turned the worship of God into strict adherence to a thousand different laws and traditions, many of which the common person isn’t even aware.

You could say, they’ve stopped worshipping God and started worshipping their traditions.

The question for us today is this: What is true religion? Or true faith? Or righteousness? Our Epistle Lesson from James 1 says true religion is “to care for

orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” (James 1:27)

Might our interpretation of true religion be what we declare in our Mission Statement? “...to be an accepting and joyful community that centers upon worship, encourages personal growth, celebrates diversity, nurtures individual gifts, and moves beyond boundaries to share, through service, Jesus’ love, compassion, and justice in an uncertain world”?

If we didn’t believe these to be the principles of true religion, would we have included them in our Mission Statement?

Jesus’ rebuke of the Pharisees in Mark 7 can be read as a challenge to all Christians - to test our priorities and practices against our understanding of our God-given mission to serve as Christ served.

I like to be comfortable, as much as the next person. And I want you to be comfortable when you come to church and participate in a worship service. I want you to be glad you came. (I want you to be able to say kind things about me after you leave.) But if our priorities are only our own comfort, we won’t be about the mission of following Jesus.

Faith traditions were once designed to help us serve God, but – for the most part – they are today what make us comfortable. Traditions envelop us in the familiar and secure. If I’ve always recited the Lord’s Prayer during Sunday morning worship, then reciting the Lord’s Prayer in church probably gives me comfort. But it may not challenge me to fulfill my God-given mission “to share, through service, Jesus’ love and justice” with an uncertain world.

So, as the church, the Body of Christ, we must continually ask ourselves whether our traditions serve God - or ourselves. Would we be willing to give up the Lord’s Prayer, or the Doxology, or the Prayer of Confession, if we learned that doing so would make us considerably more welcoming to a younger generation of folk who haven’t grown up doing these things? We must honestly challenge our own assumptions about our priorities – are they on fulfilling our mission “to share Jesus’ love and compassion” or to make ourselves comfortable when we come to church? And, yes, this may be uncomfortable and even scary.

I’m not saying I’m ready to give up our most traditional and cherished parts of worship, just like Jesus wasn’t saying he wanted to give up the practice of washing

one's hands before meals. But Jesus words pose the question, what's most important to us. Do we want clean hands or a clean heart?

So we have to ask ourselves – today, tomorrow and always - why we do what we do. Do we meet together to affirm ourselves and our own beliefs and assumptions, or do we gather to open a well of blessing to overflow to our communities of Athens, and Watkinsville, and Oconee County, and Northeast Georgia, and beyond?

Pray with me.

God, call us to focus ourselves - our attention, our attitudes, and our actions - on you and on your mission of love and justice to this hungry and violent world in which we live. Show us how to wage peace among people who seem intent on war. Teach us to administer the balm of healing upon those who suffer around us. Remind us again of Jesus' attitude of humble service and grace that we might follow his example in all we say and do. Amen.