

GOSPEL*Mark 7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23*

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

SECOND READING*James 1:17–27*

¹⁷Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. ¹⁹You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. ²¹Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. ²²But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act — they will be blessed in their doing. ²⁶If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. ²⁷Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

The year was 1875, and the ice cream soda was a brand new invention, and over a short period, was gaining in popularity among many communities. It was a new twist to take a carbonated beverage and pour it over ice cream and watch it fizzle. However, in Evanston, Illinois, the elders at the Methodist Church were taking a very dim view of this ice cream treat. Some of these church leaders believed that "soda water" was kind of intoxicating. Finally, the community leaders of Evanston were pressured into making a law that prohibited the selling and serving of ice cream sodas on Sundays. The premise was that the ice cream sodas were a corrupting influence on the people. Needless to say, the town was shocked on the ban on ice cream sodas. And in W.C. Garwood's Drug Store it was worse than shocking. It hurt sales at the soda fountain, which was the favorite gathering place of families and couples on a Sunday stroll. So to get around the local law, an enterprising fountain clerk started to serve scoops of ice cream dribbles with a thick syrup: a soda minus the soda water, minus the carbonation. The soda-less sodas became called "Sunday sodas," and they were quite legal in every way. However, they became so popular that customers began asking for "Sundays" all through the week. The church elders were indignant at having been outwitted. In an attempt to have the last word, they raised objections to the fact that the dish was named after the Holy Sabbath. And ingenuity stepped forward and the word was kept the same, but they altered the spelling of Sunday from S-U-N-D-A-Y to S-U-N-D-A-E, which has lasted.

The Law and Christianity clash again. It seems as though the two are always on a collision course. Christians need the Law, but what so easily happens in our Christian walk is that the Law becomes the measure of one's Christianity. For some, rules and regulations become the method of

telling if one is "being a Christian or not." We, as faithful people, often fall into the trap of trying to keep things "Christian" by making laws that enforce our beliefs. The dangers of that practice is that sometimes we spend more time paying attention to making sure that the law is followed, then we do to enriching our own faith. We also have a tendency to talk about the Law when we are obeying it and others are not. It's kind of like those law enforcement speeding cameras that film vehicles speeding and then send people a ticket in the mail. I had no problem with towns having those until a couple of weeks ago. Sometimes it's easy not to focus on our own faith, but instead someone else's shortfalls.

This is not a twentieth century problem for Christianity. This has been a continuous problem for the faithful people, even for the Jews before Christ, and even at the time of Christ, which is highlighted in our Gospel text this morning.

"Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them." And later, Jesus "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."

The cleansing of oneself before eating was an earmark of the Jewish faith. To assure ritual cleanliness, the faithful were to wash their hands before eating, the whole way up to their elbows, as some of the writings have suggested. All the utensils had to be cleansed by a particular method. Now the roots of this practice are logical, for in older times sterilization and purified running water were not commonplace. All of this was probably good advice for health and hygiene, and indicates just how

seriously these people took their religious practices. The problem became that the initial good rule to do these things, now had become a measure of one's faith. In short, again, the Law became the measure of how much one loved God. This is what Jesus objects to. Notice in the Gospel text where Jesus puts the focus on what is the true relationship of faith and the practice of the Law. In his answer, Jesus uses phrases like: "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me;" "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition;" "there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." Jesus emphasizes that it is not your following of the law that pinpoints your faith, it is your hearts. In fact, he even goes one step further to show that it is God and faith, that should be positioned ahead of the Law. The Law, beyond giving a sense of order and safety, is useful as a way of pointing to our need for the grace of God, but the human trap continues of us getting caught up into the measuring aspect of the Law.

Some, who have studied world religions, may know that Buddhists are not allowed to kill animals, but they can get someone else to kill them. In Thailand and Burma, to be truly virtuous, Buddhists believe they should never crack an egg then, for this would be killing an animal. Shopkeepers in the area routinely evade this restraint by keeping a supply of eggs that have been "accidentally" cracked. Wealthy Buddhists ask their servants to break the eggs; the masters escape blame because they didn't do the actual killing or breaking, the servants escape blame because they were simply obeying their master's order. This is an example how humanity will go to exaggerated lengths to attempt to stay in line with the Law.

We see it in our own society today. Many of you have dealt with zoning laws, health regulations, and environmental practices. Many of

these ordinances and rules start out with genuine and wholesome rationale. They begin in an effort to improve the quality of our lives and our stewardship of the earth, but because of trying to enforce something with unity, universally, more and more conditions are written in, until sometimes, some things become ridiculous to the individual situation. We often do the same thing in the practice of our faith. What becomes a good practice, falls into an expectation, which falls into a requirement, which in turn becomes a rule, spoken or unspoken. Just think about our worship this morning: Are we required to have candles for our worship? Are we required to say certain words or prayers in order for it to be real worship? Many would perhaps agree they are not, but what would happen if we suddenly took them away? There are many other unwritten rules or expectations we have, just in coming to church. Are we sometimes guilty of trying to make these expectations a measure whether that other person really is a real believer or not?

A man fell ill, so an ancient story goes, between two villages. It was exactly halfway between the two villages and that presented a problem to the authorities as to which village should take care of the stricken man. It had to be decided which community the man was actually closest to. And therein lay the disagreement. One village maintained that the distance should be measured from the man's navel; the other village argued that it should be calculated from the man's mouth. The outcome of the little drama was predictable, of course, as the two communities argued over the legality of the problems the poor fellow died.

So often, we too, in our humanity often get caught into tug of wars concerning laws and faith, all with the intent of trying to live out God's intention for our lives, God's call to discipleship. However, sometimes in

doing so, we can miss what is right in front of us. Sometimes we miss sharing the word and love of God, to a world that is thirsty for it, and maybe don't even know it. Our challenge as a community of faith is to reach out to this hurting world with God's message of hope, forgiveness, love and transformation.

May we stretch our own minds, our hearts, our acts in discipleship to continue to seek out ways in Praising God, Serving Others. To share this great Gospel grace. Amen.