



The Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost
September 2, 2018

The Interview

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

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)

So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?”

He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

“These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.

They worship me in vain;

their teachings are merely human rules.’

You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”

Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.”

For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.”

SERMON

WHEN I LEFT PARISH MINISTRY, ANSWERING THE CALL TO PASTORAL PSYCHOTHERAPY, I CONTINUED TO SERVE THE CHURCH THROUGH WHAT THE CENTRAL/SOUTHERN ILLINOIS SYNOD CALLS “STATED SUPPLY.” I WOULD PREACH EVERY SUNDAY FOR ONE CONGREGATION DURING THEIR PASTORAL VACANCY UNTIL THEIR NEW PASTOR WAS ONBOARD. THIS ALLOWED ME TO DEVELOP RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN ONE CONGREGATION OVER WHAT WAS TYPICALLY AT LEAST A YEAR.



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I SERVED FOUR CONGREGATIONS AS “STATED SUPPLY,” SERVING TWO OF THEM ON TWO OCCASIONS....

DEB AND I HAD HARDLY BEEN MARRIED WHEN AN OLD NORWEGIAN LUTHERAN CONGREGATION WANTED TO INTERVIEW ME AS THEIR STATED SUPPLY WITH PERHAPS SOME EXTRA TIME FOR A FEW OTHER DUTIES.

I PREACHED ON A SUNDAY MORNING AND THEN DEB AND I WERE INVITED DOWN INTO THEIR CLAUSTROPHIC CHURCH BASEMENT WHERE I SAT SQUEEZED AROUND A TABLE WITH THE CHURCH COUNCIL.

CONGREGATIONAL MEMBERS ALSO CAME DOWN AND FORMED A PEANUT GALLERY ON EITHER SIDE OF THE COUNCIL TABLE. DEB SAT WITH THEM.

NOW THIS WAS A LONG TIME AGO. MY HAIR WAS MUCH LONGER AND DARKER, ALONG WITH A BUSHIER AND DARKER MOUSTACHE.

IT QUICKLY BECAME APPARENT THAT IT WAS A TOUGH CONGREGATION. I DIDN'T FEEL AS THOUGH OUR CONVERSATION WAS GOING ALL THAT WELL, WHEN THE HEFTY COUNCIL PRESIDENT, SITTING TO MY RIGHT, TURNED AND SAID, “WHEN ARE YOU GOING TO CUT YOUR HAIR AND TRIM YOUR MOUSTACHE?”

WITHOUT MISSING A BEAT, I SHOT BACK, “WHEN YOU LOSE FORTY POUNDS.”

THE PEANUT GALLERY WENT WILD, SOME PEOPLE LAUGHING SO HARD THEY ALMOST FELL OFF THEIR CHAIRS. DEB LOOKED STRICKEN.

AWKWARDLY, WE FINISHED THE INTERVIEW, DEB AND I DROVE BACK HOME AND, SURPRISINGLY, I WASN'T OFFERED THE JOB.



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POOR DEB. THIS WAS HER FIRST TASTE OF BEING A PASTOR'S SPOUSE AND, IN HER IDEALISM ABOUT THE CHURCH, SHE WAS CRUSHED....

IF WE ARE GOING TO BE MATURE MEN AND WOMEN OF FAITH, THE INITIAL CRITICAL MOVE IS FROM SEEING GOD AS BEING OUT THERE TO KNOWING GOD WITHIN, AROUND US, AND IN OUR MIDST.

IF WE ARE GOING TO BE MATURE WOMEN AND MEN OF FAITH, THE SECOND CRITICAL MOVE IS FROM FOCUSING ON OTHER PEOPLES' OUTER LIFE TO FOCUSING ON OUR INNER LIFE.

WITHOUT THESE TWO CRITICAL MOVES WE WILL WORSHIP A JUDGMENTAL AND DEMANDING GOD.

WITHOUT THESE TWO CRITICAL MOVES, WE WILL REMAIN JUDGMENTAL AND SELF-RIGHTEOUS TOWARD OTHERS.

IN A NUTSHELL, THIS IS WHAT THE GOSPEL IS TEACHING US THIS MORNING/EVENING.

JESUS COMES FROM THE LINE OF HEBREW PROPHETS WHO HAVE THE UNCANNY ABILITY TO RECOGNIZE WHEN PEOPLE CONFUSE ETERNAL TRUTH WITH PARTIAL AND PASSING KNOWLEDGE OR PRACTICE.

AND WHAT HAPPENS TO JESUS AND THE PROPHETS WHEN THEY EXPOSE THE CONFUSION? THEY ARE KILLED BY THE PEOPLE WHO ARE CONFUSED.

FOR EXAMPLE, THE RITUAL OF WASHING HANDS MENTIONED IN THE GOSPEL WAS MERELY A SYMBOLIC GESTURE MEANT TO POINT TO THE GOAL OF HAVING A CLEAN HEART.



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BUT THE CONFUSED PHARISEES AND TEACHERS OF THE LAW ARE NOT INTERESTED IN THE CLEANLINESS OF THE DISCIPLES' HEARTS, ONLY OUTRAGED THAT THEY ARE EATING WITH DEFILED HANDS.

YEAH, LET'S REALLY MAKE IT A BIG DEAL! **DEFILED HANDS!!!!**

THE PARTIAL AND PASSING OUTER MINUTIAE REPLACES ETERNAL INNER TRUTH.

THE PHARISEES AND TEACHERS OF THE LAW ARE REPRESENTATIVE OF ALL JUDGMENTAL AND SELF-RIGHTEOUS FOLKS WHO ARE MOST CONCERNED ABOUT ADIAPHORA, WHAT THE LUTHERAN REFORMERS CALLED "THE INDIFFERENT THINGS." THE PHARISEES AND TEACHERS OF THE LAW ARE REPRESENTATIVE OF ALL THOSE WHO HAVE LOST THEIR WAY ON THE PATH TO A CLEAN HEART.

TO GRANT HAND WASHING EQUAL IMPORTANCE TO A CLEAN HEART IS A FORM OF IDOLATRY IN THE EYES OF THE PROPHETS.

AND THIS IS A CENTRAL AND KEY PRINCIPLE FOR CORRECT SCRIPTURE INTERPRETATION: ONE MUST BE ABLE TO DISTINGUISH THE ESSENTIALS FROM THE ACCIDENTALS, THE SYMBOLS FROM THE SUBSTANCE THE SYMBOLS REPRESENT, THE METAPHOR FROM SIMPLE SPEECH.

LUTHER SAYS, "PREACH IN SUCH A WAY THAT IF THE PEOPLE LISTENING DO NOT COME TO HATE THEIR SIN, THEY WILL INSTEAD HATE YOU."

THAT'S PRETTY SCARY STUFF TO THOSE OF US WHO DARE ENTER THE PULPIT.

BUT HE IS POINTING TO THE REALITY THAT WHEN THE PHARISEES AND TEACHERS OF THE LAW HEAR WHAT JESUS SAYS, THEY DO NOT SEE WHERE THEY HAVE CONFUSED ETERNAL TRUTH WITH HUMAN TRADITION AND THEREBY THEY DO NOT HATE THEIR MIS-STEP, THEIR SIN.



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AND SO, THEY HATE JESUS FOR SPEAKING THE TRUTH THEY WILL NOT ACCEPT, BUT **KNOW** AS TRUTH IN THEIR HEARTS.

JESUS SAYS, "ISAIAH WAS RIGHT WHEN HE PROPHESED ABOUT YOU HYPOCRITES, AS IT IS WRITTEN:

'THESE PEOPLE HONOR ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEARTS ARE FAR FROM ME. THEY WORSHIP ME IN VAIN; THEIR TEACHINGS ARE MERELY HUMAN RULES. YOU HAVE LET GO OF THE COMMANDS OF GOD AND ARE HOLDING ON TO HUMAN TRADITIONS.'"

THE PHARISEES KNOW THE TEACHING OF THE PROPHET MICAH: "HE HAS SHOWN YOU, O MORTAL, WHAT IS GOOD. AND WHAT DOES THE LORD REQUIRE OF YOU? TO ACT JUSTLY AND TO LOVE MERCY AND TO WALK HUMBLY WITH YOUR GOD."

BUT WHEN THEY LET GO OF THE COMMANDS OF GOD, THEY END UP WITH A VERY SMALL, PETTY, ANGRY, JUDGMENTAL GOD CONCERNED OVER WHO DID NOT WASH THEIR HANDS....

AT A PICNIC FOR A CATHOLIC SCHOOL, THE MOTHER SUPERIOR STACKED A PILE OF APPLES ON ONE END OF THE TABLE AND PUT UP A SIGN: "TAKE ONLY ONE APPLE. GOD IS WATCHING."

ON THE OTHER END OF THE TABLE WAS A PILE OF COOKIES. A SECOND GRADE GIRL PUT UP A SIGN: "TAKE AS MANY AS YOU WANT. GOD IS WATCHING THE APPLES."

...IN THIS WAY, THE BIBLE RESEMBLES "A TEXT IN TRAVAIL."

SCRIPTURE—AND LIFE ITSELF—IS INVARIABLY THREE STEPS FORWARD AND TWO STEPS BACK. THE PEOPLE OF GOD GET THE POINT AND THEN LOSE IT OR DOUBT IT. JUST LIKE WE DO.

OUR JOB IS TO SEE WHERE THE "THREE STEPS FORWARD" TEXTS AND LIFE ARE HEADING: ALWAYS TOWARD MERCY, FORGIVENESS, INCLUSION, ACCEPTANCE, NONVIOLENCE, TRUST, GRACE OVER THE LAW, WORKING ON THE SIDE OF THE POOR AND DISENFRANCHISED.



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OUR JOB IS TO GUARD AGAINST THE “TWO STEPS BACK” IN OUR TEXTS AND LIFE AND REFUSE TO BE DRAWN INTO THEIR DISTORTED VIEW, INVARIABLY ABOUT VENGEANCE ON OUR ENEMIES, GOD AS A WRATHFUL JUDGE, ALL THOSE PEOPLE WHO GOD SUPPOSEDLY CONDEMNNS (WHICH, OF COURSE, IS NEVER US), LAW OVER GRACE, FORM OVER SUBSTANCE, AND TRADITION OVER RELATIONSHIP.

THIS IS WHY SPIRITUALLY MATURE MEN AND WOMEN HAVE AS THEIR INITIAL STEP THE MOVEMENT FROM GOD OUT THERE TO GOD WITHIN, AROUND US, AND IN OUR MIDST.

THIS IS WHY SPIRITUALLY MATURE WOMEN AND MEN REFUSE TO FOCUS ON OTHER PEOPLES’ EXTERNAL BEHAVIOR AND FOCUS ON THEIR OWN INNER LIFE....

IN MY LAST CONGREGATION IN ILLINOIS, WE HAD A TOPNOTCH BAND. THREE OF US HAD PLAYED PROFESSIONALLY.

AT HIS COMPANY CHRISTMAS PARTY, ONE OF OUR GUITARISTS PLAYED SANTA CLAUS FOR THE KIDS. THE FOLLOWING SUNDAY, ONE OF OUR LESS MATURE MEMBERS BROUGHT ME A PHOTO OF SANTA WITH WHITE POWDER UNDER HIS NOSE AND A FEW DROPS OF BLOOD FALLING FROM ONE NOSTRIL. HE HAD SNORTED A FEW LINES OF COCAINE BEFORE PLAYING SANTA.

SHE WANTED TO KNOW IF I WAS GOING TO ALLOW HIM TO CONTINUE TO PLAY IN THE CONGREGATION’S BAND.

A SHORT TIME LATER THAT SUNDAY MORNING, HE SHAMEFULLY ASKED ME THE SAME THING.

I TOLD HER “IF HE GOES, I GO.”



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I TOLD HIM, “OF COURSE YOU’RE STILL IN THE BAND. AND, WE MIGHT WANT TO TALK ABOUT GETTING YOU SOME HELP.” AND WE MOVED IT FORWARD THREE STEPS.

EARLIER THIS MORNING, WE CONFESSED THAT CHRIST DIED FOR US WHILE WE YET WERE SINNERS.

DO WE BELIEVE THIS, LIVE LIKE THIS, OR IS THIS JUST SOME ROTE RECITATION WE MOUTH SUNDAY AFTER SUNDAY?

ST. PAUL PUTS IT ON THE LINE: “THE WRITTEN LETTERS BRING DEATH, BUT THE SPIRIT GIVES LIFE.”

JUST AS OUR TEXT MORNING/EVENING, JESUS KNOWS HOW TO CONNECT THE “THREE STEPS FORWARD” SCRIPTURE THAT CONFIRM THE GOD HE HAS MET, KNOWS, LOVES, AND TRUSTS.

HE NEVER QUOTES THE BOOK OF NUMBERS WHICH IS RITUALISTIC AND LEGALISTIC. HE IGNORES JOSHUA AND JUDGES, BOTH FULL OF SANCTIFIED VIOLENCE.

JESUS DOES NOT MENTION THE LIST OF 28 “THOU SHALL NOTS” IN LEVITICUS 18 THROUGH 20, BUT CHOOSES TO ECHO THE RARE POSITIVE LEVITICUS TEXT: “YOU MUST LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.”

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BECOMING EXPANSIVE DESCRIBES THE MOVE JESUS URGES US TO MAKE IN ALL ASPECTS OF OUR LIFE. EXPANSIVENESS IS A LIFE CHARACTERIZED BY **RICHNESS, ABUNDANCE, AND MAGNIFICENCE**. GOD WANTS US TO HAVE **BIG, COMPASSIONATE HEARTS**. A LIFE THAT TRANSCENDS THE OUTER DIFFERENCES BETWEEN US AND CONNECTS WITH THE INNER SPIRIT....

I HOPE YOU SAW SOME PART OF JOHN MCCAIN'S MEMORIAL SERVICE YESTERDAY. I WONDER IF WE ARE SADDENED EVEN MORE BY HIS DEATH BECAUSE OF THE PITIFUL IMPOVERISHMENT OF THE POLITICAL ARENA THESE DAYS: FULL OF TWEETS, TRASH, AND EMPTY TRAPPINGS.

IN THE POLITICAL ARENA, MCCAIN EMBODIED WHAT THE GOSPEL ADDRESSES THIS MORNING, SUMMED UP IN THESE WORDS BY PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA:

JOHN "CONCLUDED THAT THE ONLY WAY TO REALLY MAKE A MARK ON THE WORLD IS TO COMMIT TO SOMETHING BIGGER THAN YOURSELF.... HE DID UNDERSTAND THAT SOME PRINCIPLES TRANSCEND POLITICS, THAT SOME VALUES TRANSCEND PARTY. HE CONSIDERED IT PART OF HIS DUTY TO UPHOLD THOSE PRINCIPLES AND UPHOLD THOSE VALUES.

JOHN UNDERSTOOD, AS JFK UNDERSTOOD, AS RONALD REAGAN UNDERSTOOD, THAT PART OF WHAT MAKES OUR COUNTRY GREAT IS THAT OUR MEMBERSHIP IS BASED NOT ON OUR BLOODLINE, NOT ON WHAT WE LOOK LIKE, WHAT OUR LAST NAMES ARE, IT'S NOT BASED ON WHERE OUR PARENTS OR GRANDPARENTS CAME FROM, OR HOW RECENTLY THEY ARRIVED, BUT ON OUR ADHERENCE TO A COMMON CREED: THAT ALL OF US ARE CREATED EQUAL, ENDOWED BY OUR CREATOR WITH CERTAIN INALIENABLE RIGHTS. FOR HE CONSIDERED IT THE IMPERATIVE OF EVERY CITIZEN WHO LOVES THIS COUNTRY TO TREAT PEOPLE FAIRLY....



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SO MUCH OF OUR POLITICS, OUR PUBLIC LIFE, OUR PUBLIC DISCOURSE CAN SEEM SMALL AND MEAN AND PETTY, TRAFFICKING IN BOMBAST AND INSULT AND PHONY CONTROVERSIES AND MANUFACTURED OUTRAGE. JOHN CALLED ON US TO BE BIGGER THAN THAT. HE CALLED ON US TO BE BETTER THAN THAT....”

”WE HONOR HIM BEST BY RECOGNIZING THAT THERE ARE SOME THINGS BIGGER THAN PARTY OR AMBITION OR MONEY OR FAME OR POWER. THAT THERE ARE SOME THINGS THAT ARE WORTH RISKING EVERYTHING FOR: PRINCIPLES THAT ARE ETERNAL, TRUTHS THAT ARE ABIDING. AT HIS BEST, JOHN SHOWED US WHAT THAT MEANS. FOR THAT, WE ARE ALL DEEPLY IN HIS DEBT.”

THE LIVING SPIRIT OF GOD WITHIN, AROUND US, AND IN OUR MIDST PULLS, PUSHES, GOADS, ENTICES, URGES US TOWARD MERCY, KINDNESS, SELF-SACRIFICE, LOVE, FORGIVENESS, ACCEPTANCE, INCLUSION, NON-VIOLENCE, GRACE, AND TRUST.

SONG: YOU CAN LOVE YOURSELF BY KEB MO (TONGUE-IN-CHEEK IN MEMORY OF THE HUMOR OF JOHN MCCAIN)