

“Minding Your Manners~Mannered Your Mind”

GSW 8/30/09

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson – Mark 7:1-23

After many weeks with the Gospel of John, the lectionary reading shifts this week to Mark’s Gospel and we’ll stay there through the Fall – and today we hear an interesting encounter between Jesus and the religious leaders about eating and washing hands and food – about laws and regulations – about purity, or impurity on the outside and the inside. In the midst of that, we’ll hear Jesus criticize something called “Corban” and although it’s not the main thing I am focusing on, I wanted to explain Corban before we read because otherwise it doesn’t make much sense. Part of what Jesus critiques in the Pharisees is rules that look pious but are actually hypocritical, and that’s what this Corban is about. Corban means a gift to God, or in this case a gift to support the temple – sounds good; but a system had been devised for people to designate their assets as “Corban” – which is a promise to give it to temple when they died – and then that protected them from having to use their assets for other things, such as caring for their elderly parents! So you could promise your estate to the temple, keep living high while you are alive, and freeze the parents out of the picture. It’s just one example Jesus uses to say that something is wrong with the religious picture of his day.

Did you notice the radical – even subversive – even anarchical content in the Gospel lesson? I can assure you that this story is never found in any children’s church school curriculum – it is too dangerous – it’s good that we had our littlest children leave before I read it, and perhaps I should have had parents cover the ears of the children who remained in the sanctuary – what we read could cause chaos and bedlam to erupt in our society...did you hear it?...Jesus says: **YOU DON’T HAVE TO WASH YOUR HANDS BEFORE YOU EAT!** This is shocking. The religious leaders come to Jesus tattling on his disciples – ‘we saw your disciples eating and they didn’t wash their hands first...’ – but Jesus doesn’t care! If word gets out about this, it could shake the foundations of Western Civilization – parent horrified as children run rampant with dirty hands...and it’s not only unhealthy, it’s immoral – after all, ‘cleanliness is next to godliness’ – right? I remember that in my childhood – washing hands yes, but especially going to church we would have to be clean; pulling out in the driveway, in the car, my Dad would inspect me – hands, ears, and especially my nose for some reason – he looked up my nose...seriously! He never did that otherwise, but this was very important when going to church. Those Jewish religious leaders would have liked my Dad – but Jesus? – he delivers a shocker: **YOU DON’T HAVE TO WASH YOUR HANDS!** We need to protect our young people from such insidious teaching as this!

Alright – obviously I don’t think the main point of this passage is not washing your hands – and I don’t want to be responsible for making the swine flu any worse than it is going to be– it’s already going to be enough of a public health challenge – so, **WASH YOUR HANDS.** But I do think the main point of this passage is to

understand why Jesus isn't concerned when his disciples don't wash their hands on this particular occasion; it really does upset the Pharisees – it really is serious to them. Because this was not about public health – this was more about 'cleanliness is next to godliness' – this was about the whole list of ceremonies and purifications and procedures that had been developed in Jewish practice as expressions of devotion to God and as a way of showing one's own religious commitment. These were traditions started way back in the time of Moses with the many purification laws you find given after the Exodus – and they had developed over the years into a complex set of rules and regulations about every aspect of life – and about food in particular.

And Jesus pushes against those traditions – and there is a complexity, intricacy to all of these rules that would likely strike us as odd or cumbersome or burdensome and makes it easy for us to agree with Jesus. But before we hear how Jesus pushes against them, I want to say something about the potential beauty and meaning in all of these rules and regulations as well. When I lived in Princeton during my Seminary years, my ex-wife Diane and I would do some babysitting to earn some spending money, and we babysat a couple of times for a Jewish family – a rabbi, actually – he and his wife had several children. And other than remembering that one of the kids was a real challenge, I also remember they were strictly kosher – following the Jewish regulations on what foods you eat, and how you prepare the foods. There were separate sets of dishes for various foods- separate spots in the cupboards and refrigerator – it seemed quite bewildering and tedious to me – and they basically told us not to touch anything so we wouldn't mess it up! But I also found something intriguing and impressive about it: these were people who saw a purpose and meaning in every aspect of life – food was not just something to eat, it was an expression of spirituality- a part of one's relationship with God – there was an intention to be mindful of and to honor God.

It's important that we not start with the assumption there is something inherently bad about ritual or tradition, or rules and regulations – we all have those in our lives whether obvious or subtle, and they can be not only useful but beautiful. In the story from Mark, Jesus is clearly trying to push the buttons of the Pharisees, but the point is not to debate washing hands or not, or having kosher food or not – Jesus is getting at the intention, the spirit, the heart behind the action. And the problem Jesus sees in the religious practice of these leaders is that the practices themselves have become the religion – that the practices have shifted from being expressions of devotion and faithfulness to God, to being the content of devotion and faith itself. And that is a problem. Part of the wisdom of Jesus we find in Jesus is that he does not focus on the appearance of things, but on the heart, the intention and content; Jesus does not go after these religious practices for what they are, but for the meaning they have taken on: which is the belief that if you follow the right system on the outside – clean/pure/rules/system/structure - if you do all that right,

then you are “right” with God too. If you mind your manners on the outside, you’re all set – with God and self and others.

The radical, subversive idea Jesus reveals in this story isn’t about washing your hands or not, it is the truth that God isn’t nearly as interested in us minding our manners, as in mannering our minds – or if I give up on my clever sermon title – interested in forming our hearts – transforming our thoughts – shaping our spirits and our choices. Jesus speaks not of outside appearances or practices, but of transformation from the inside out – a changed heart transforming life. That’s why Jesus brings up that particular practice of “Corban” – it was an example of a practice that allowed people to give the appearance of purity, and the support of religion; but was actually against the word and ways of God – appearing pure while actually cheating your parents. And that’s why Jesus takes on the whole system of appearances – all the laws about food and purification – Jesus says: ‘what you eat and how you eat it is not going to save you’ – ‘what is in your heart?...that’s what really matters’ – ‘you can wash your hands all you want, but it’s what’s on the inside that counts.’

And then Jesus gives quite an impressive list of content for the human heart: *fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly* – it is impressive in its awfulness. Which does not, I think, portray Jesus as a pessimist about humanity – in this context, what Jesus is making clear is that the human heart is not a neutral site; it is a place, our lives are a place, touched by the brokenness and deadliness present in this world, by sin and by hurt; and is simply not true that an outside regimen of the right rules or practices will change that. Transformation is needed much deeper and needed from within – in the human heart, mind, soul – that is a true understanding of the human condition.

And perhaps that’s not such big news for us – we know it’s not just about appearances and rules, right? That what is at stake in our faith and our lives goes much deeper than that? Yeah, we know – but it’s just very interesting to me that Jesus makes a point of talking with religious people about such things – religious people like the Pharisees – religious people like us. It is a reality of the ‘religious condition’ to be tempted to be very attached to our systems - and that is simply a reality we need to always be aware of – face – challenge in ourselves and together as a community. There’s nothing wrong with traditions and patterns and structures in themselves – but there is always the deadening shift that can happen, that the actions or the structure become the meaning, rather than express the meaning of our faith in God; the deadening shift of seeing religion as a means of our control over life rather than as an expression of God’s grace. Jesus’ words challenge religious people like us to hold faith not as a system but as the power of transformation – or not to hold at all, but be held in the heart-transforming grace of God, above any tradition or rule.

This is a word to religious people – and I was thinking it is a word to parents too, which is some of us; and a word to all who nurture children and youth, which is all of us, in our baptismal covenant, our church family. Beyond washing hands or

not, what Jesus speaks to us as parents and a community of nurture, is that we are not about plugging children into a system that produces the correct or preferred outcome. I know we want our children to find joy and meaning, to grow in faith and in purpose, to make life-giving choices – and so it’s tempting to think that there is a system to make that happen...a parenting-style to use, a church school curriculum to follow, the right school to pick, the right church to join. And of course there is value in all those things...but mostly we are reminded it is about the heart – about relationship – about the things that abide. Which means it is a giving up of control and entrusting to grace – giving what we can from our hearts and believing God will bring those seeds to fruition in the hearts of our children.

And beyond us religious folks and our families and church, I’ve been thinking this is a word for our world as well – for how we view and engage our world. The word out there is that if we just get the right laws and policies passed, just get the right politicians and leaders in place, then all will be “right” – and we’re tempted to believe it...partly because those are important things! But the heart of the matter goes deeper – our Lord Jesus gives us a word that has us see that the transformation of the heart – the heart of a person, and of peoples, groups, nations – that is always the deeper challenge at hand. It is not just about the right system, it is about the renewal of heart and mind and soul; it is not just the right rules, it is people transformed from the inside by the grace of God.

Because the true power is in the heart – what if we would turn around the list of the impure heart that Jesus gives – very powerfully destructive forces indeed; turn that around and instead list the substance of the heart that Jesus himself gives to be at work in us and through us: *wisdom... fidelity... generosity... mercy... purity... gratitude... grace... honesty... hope... humility... maturity*. That is not a system or rules – that is the life-giving power of God at work in us and in this world.

Here’s something you don’t hear from the pulpit too often – don’t listen to Jesus – DO wash your hands.

But here’s something else – DO listen to Jesus: don’t just have faith be about minding your manners, but about manning our lives from transformed hearts – the Spirit of Christ abiding in, transforming our hearts and expressed in our lives... and sometimes that might just mean getting our hands dirty – AMEN.