

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 14th Sunday After Pentecost, August 30, 2015

Ritual Cleanliness

Dr. Kenneth Humphreys
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Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Our scripture reading presents a situation which seems strange in today's world with all we know now about cleanliness and disease. We are taught from childhood to always wash our hands before eating and signs in restaurant restrooms remind us to wash our hands. It is ingrained in our culture, one North Carolina senator notwithstanding.

Our scripture reading describes the reaction of the Pharisees when they noticed the disciples eating without first washing their hands. You and I might also question that today for health reasons, but that is not why the Pharisees questioned it back then. Germs and the causes of disease were unknown 2000 years ago and hand washing was not for the purpose of preventing disease. Rather it was for ritualistic reasons.

The Pharisees were concerned about ritualistic purity. The Pharisees observed the Law of Moses, the 613 commandments in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. It mattered not if all of these commandments made sense, and today we know that many do not. If the commandment was there, the Pharisees obeyed it as did the Sadducees. But the Pharisees went further --- much further.

The Old Testament law does not require ordinary meals to be eaten in a state of ritual purity except for priests eating sacrificial offerings or others sharing a portion of those offerings. But the Pharisees expanded that by establishing a practice which required hand washing as a sign of purity and fidelity to God, not for reasons of cleanliness. This is what is referred to by the Pharisees question, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?" The tradition of the elders was part of the Oral Torah, things added to the religious rules over the centuries by the scribes and Pharisees, not things in the actual Law at all.

Interestingly enough the Bible prescribes immersion, a bath, to cleanse one of impurity, but the Pharisees modified that rule to the simple act of washing hands. They

no longer required bathing the whole body or laundering clothes. I guess it didn't matter if you stank so long as your hands were clean.

According to William Barclay¹ the rules were so definite and rigid that they required hand washing in a very specific way before every meal and also between each course. Water for washing was kept in large stone jars to keep it pure. Hands were held with the finger tips pointed upward, water was then poured over each hand in turn and while the hands were wet each hand had to be cleansed with the fist of the other hand. Then the hands were held with fingers pointed downward to let the water drain away. It was totally ritualistic.

There is a story of a rabbi who was imprisoned by the Romans who used the water given to him for hand washing, not for drinking. In the end he nearly died of thirst because he was so determined to observe the ritual rules of cleanliness.

To the Pharisees this was religion. They considered service to God to be ritualistic, ceremonial and obedient to a mass of taboos, rules and regulations. They buried ethical religion under the mass of rules in the Torah and even more rules in the Oral Torah.

This is why the Pharisees attacked Jesus and the disciples --- ritual, rules and regulations --- not true holiness.

Were the hands of the disciples dirty? Possibly, but we really don't know. They may well have been clean but to the Pharisees they were defiled because the ritual cleansing had not been followed. It had nothing to do with sanitation at all.

Jesus rebuts the Pharisees quoting Isaiah speaking for God, *"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."*

He then addresses the people saying, *"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 them that defiles them."*

The Rev. Lamar Williamson, Jr.² who is a member of our Presbytery, said, *"Jesus does not abolish the concept of 'defilement' or the 'clean/unclean' distinction. He does, however, reinterpret the latter in a way that picks up the prophetic and ethical understanding of uncleanness and rejects the ritual and Pharisaic understanding of it."*

Jesus is taking issue with rigidity in observance of faith and in setting up false

criteria to assess reverence to God. He emphasizes that it is not what a person eats or how they eat that matters, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them --- what comes out of the heart and mind --- “*sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.*” These are the evils that defile a person, not how they observe formal worship rituals.

Rev. Williamson points out that formalism and ritual is a live issue in churches even today in ways that “... *masks avoidance of the word of God.*”

In our scripture reading that formalism is hand washing and kosher laws. In some Christian churches today it is patterns of language such as using a particular prayer book to the exclusion of others or social customs such as what kind of clothing to wear to church. It is in baptismal practices --- immersion, pouring or sprinkling or infant or adult only baptism.

It is in the choice of a particular Bible translation to the exclusion of all others, the idea that the word of God is not expressed validly if you don't read a specific translation --- “If the King James Bible was good enough for Jesus, it is good enough for me.”

Traditional worship or contemporary worship? Praise bands? Communion every week? Once a month? Quarterly?

Many congregations struggle with these issues and with any effort to innovate in worship.

In the words of Rev. Williamson, “*The problem addressed [in our scripture reading] is tradition alienated from the word of God. By emphasizing the secondary place of human traditions and the primary place of the commandments of God, this text calls us beyond arguments over what is old and what is new to a concern over what is vital.*”

As William Barclay put it, “*There is no greater religious peril than that of identifying religion with outward observance. There is no commoner religious mistake than to identify goodness with certain so-called religious acts. Church-going, Bible-reading, careful annual giving, even time-tabled prayer do not make a person a good person. The fundamental question is ‘How is a person’s heart toward God and toward others?’ And if in a person’s heart there are enmity, bitterness, grudges and pride, not all the religious observances in the world will make that person anything other than a hypocrite.*”

“... true religion can never be the product of a person’s mind. It must always come not from a person’s ingenious discoveries, but from the simple listening to and acceptance of the voice of God.” (Quote has been rephrased to make it gender neutral).

Amen.

1. William Barclay, “The Gospel of Mark”, rev. ed., Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1975

2. Lamar Williamson, Jr., “Mark”, John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1983

Note: All scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011