

February 17, 2019
6th Sunday after Epiphany

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Actions Matter”
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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 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 honours me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
7 in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines."
8You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.'

14 Then 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.'

Actions Matter

We notice this morning that Jesus spars with the Pharisees, we need to remember that there isn't any animosity between Jesus and the religious leaders, yet. There is no guarantee that the question was asked to trick Jesus or to get to the bottom of the problem at hand simply. But the fact is that at the time not everyone followed the same rules about being ceremonially clean, or followed the strict dietary regulations. We should also notice that Jesus isn't strictly telling the Pharisees not to eat or drink things that are unclean. There is no evidence that Jesus isn't still following the dietary restrictions of his ancestors. After all, Jesus is a young man that was brought up in the Jewish culture. He would have followed the norms of his people, probably. Much like some of the traditions in our denomination that we feel are just the way we do things, even though in reality we haven't done them that way all the time. Much like the Pharisees, we tend to do them because it's tradition, but perhaps we have forgotten why we do them, or that they aren't as old as we think they are.

It wasn't until the 1960's that the Catholic mass was said in anything but latin which prevented people from understanding what the scriptures were. For centuries only the educated and clergy were even able to read the scriptures since they were trained in Latin and could physically read the scriptures. Another new tradition that seems like it has always been around is the pew. In the early days of the church, there were family pews. It was known as a family pew because people would pay for their pew so that they could sit there every week. In the same way, weddings were performed in the minister's office or the persons home. It didn't occur to them to have them in the church.

In the same way, Jesus is reminding the Pharisees that they are doing things out of sentimentality. Because it is the way, we always do it. What Jesus tells them though, isn't what goes into the body that matters. What we put into our body isn't what makes us clean and unclean. That isn't what the issue is, because God can make anything clean. What does matter is what we do? What our actions are and the why behind our actions. Why were pews made free instead of on a monthly paid fee? Because we wanted to make church open to all instead of only those who could quite literally afford it. Why did scriptures become written in English, and the services spoken in English instead of Latin? So that the scriptures

and the spoken words of God could be accessible to all, not just the wealthy and those who knew a dead language.

These things were done so that scriptures, church, and the word of God would be accessible to all, not just the select few. Let's be honest if scriptures were still only written in Latin, I wouldn't be reading them. I might be able to handle them in Hebrew. But this allows for the entire population to be able to learn and be able to realize the love of God is for all, not just a few. That is what Jesus is trying to remind the Pharisees of that God's love is for all, not just the ones who follow the letter of the law, or the ones who remember to wash not only the pots and pans, but also their hands before eating. Jesus is also teaching us that our motives are important. That the why of our actions is just as important as the action itself. If we collect hats and scarves to give to the local schools during winter so that we feel good about ourselves that isn't a good motive. If we do it because we realize that there are children who don't have hats and mittens and their families might not be able to help them get them, then that's better. If we are doing it so we can get in good with God, that isn't the greatest reason.

James reminds us that not all of the ways in the Old Testament are thrown out when Jesus comes and establishes the new law. He reminds us that we are still called to take care of the widow and orphans. That we are to look after them and help them with their needs. We are to welcome them into our communities and not just smile at them as they bring beautiful children in, but welcome them into our lives. Gladly welcome them into our pews when kids want a toy that we have brought or when they just need that adoptive grandparent to snuggle them. It is our job to not only hear the word of God but to also allow it to seep into our hearts and make it a part of our being so that everything we do lives out the calling of God on our individual lives. As James says if we simply hear the words and don't act on them, it is like looking into a mirror and walking away and forgetting what we have seen. If we continue to go about our lives doing things simply because it's the way we have always done it or because we think it's the right tradition to follow; then we are as bad as the Pharisees who only cared about the letter of the law. What James and Jesus both are speaking of is embodying the scriptures into our daily lives.

We are called to love our neighbor, whoever that might be, whatever they might look like, whatever nationality or sexual orientation they might be. We are called to love them. Let's remember for a moment that Jesus and the Pharisees were on the same team. They are all learned, Jewish men. Yet the Pharisees are nitpicking

what the disciples are doing. Sometimes we do something to our brothers and sisters. Perhaps it isn't even intentional; just a comment said the wrong way, sometimes we do say something that cuts to the heart and leaves people hurting for years. When our actions, deeds, and words don't match what we say we believe in then nothing we do matters. When we tell someone that we love them, then turn them away at the borders, that is not showing love to the least of these. When we say that the tired and the hungry will be fed and welcomed, and lock them in cages than we are not the body of Christ. When we tell someone that their funeral casserole is not good enough, we are telling them that they aren't good enough for the body of Christ.

Our words and our actions matter to God and to those around us. There are Many people today that often don't come to church because it's too centered on God, because they aren't good enough to come because they aren't rich enough because they aren't perfect like those inside. The fact is though that Jesus was criticized for not being a perfect Jew. Let me repeat that. Jesus, the son of God, was questioned about being a perfect Jew. We weren't called to be perfect; we were called to be God's children and to take that message to those around us. We were called to love one another and to build one another up.

There was a time when people couldn't understand anything in a worship service because of a language barrier. There was a time when not washing your hands before a meal would have meant a sacrifice at the temple. Today we are locking kids in cages, we have school shoots, and less people in the church. Why? Because people don't know that it is ok to love our brothers and sisters that are different from us. Because people don't know that it's ok to accept help from someone else instead of doing it on their own. Because we think that we can only have people that look like us in our churches, but when we get to the heart of the matter, Jesus didn't care if the disciples hands were clean, he needed them to nourish their bodies so that they could go back out and tell others that God loved them. That's what we need to do. With our whole hearts, minds, bodies, and soles, and especially with our actions, we need to tell others that they are loved.

That we love them, that a God bigger than the universe loves them. That it doesn't matter if they come in jeans, have kids that scream, if they have piercings, tattoos, or are 92. They are loved. They don't have to be perfect. None of us are, they simply need to come and allow themselves to be loved by the God of the universe if we can let them know in some small way that they are loved, even by inviting them for a cup of coffee, by paying it forward with their groceries, by

watching their kids for them. With no expectation that they come to church, but simply to let them know that they are loved. Then we are the body of Christ to them.

We do these things because we are reminded that it is acts of love that God has called us too. Acts of reaching out and showing Christ to one another. It wasn't to remind everyone that they have to be perfect, because again I fail on that account daily. No, it's looking at our neighbor and remembering that they are a child of God that is seeking God's love today. We are able to be God's love for them. Our actions remind them that when they have a need, we answer it and we help them. We don't ask them to abide by the 600 laws of the old testament; we simply show them that we and in turn God, loves them. We do that by not showing them that we are better than them, that we are perfect, but by sharing not only our extra with them but the scriptures. We do it by remembering that it doesn't matter how we look, or even if we all wash our hands before a meal, what matters is that we come before God and we give God our whole hearts, and in turn, we turn and give our all to our neighbor without hesitation. To God be the Glory. Amen.