

Sermon preached August 30, 2009
Year B, Proper 17
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
North Andover, Massachusetts
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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I was in seminary, each religious denomination had a reputation. The Presbyterians were God's frozen chosen. The Lutherans believed that pot-luck dinners were sacraments. The Baptists sang hymns about being washed in blood and gave long sermons. The Catholics couldn't sing and gave short sermons. The Episcopalians believed in salvation by grace through good taste. They also gave the best cocktail parties.

Now Jesus didn't found any particular denomination, but he had some pretty clear opinions about religion. In Mark's gospel Jesus and his disciples are together in the town of Gennesaret eating a meal. The Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem feel threatened by his popularity and they approach him during the meal with the intent to undermine his authority. The Pharisees are waiting for Jesus to do something wrong. They think they have him when, while milling through the crowd, they notice that several of the disciples hadn't ritually washed their hands before the meal.

Mark points out that the Pharisees are very concerned about the traditions handed down by the elders, including washing hands, food, pots and kettles before eating. In glee, in the presence of the crowd, the Pharisees ask Jesus why his disciples are flaunting the tradition of the elders. Christ's two part response forms the basis for many critiques of religion and human tradition. He begins by addressing the unspoken assumption behind their question which is, "Your disciples don't follow the tradition, therefore you and they must not be of God."

Jesus answers the Pharisees and scribes first by quoting the prophet Isaiah. "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines," (cf. Is 29:13). In other words, the Pharisees are more concerned with human traditions than with the commandments of God. They say they honor and follow God, when in reality they follow rules for their own gain.

Jesus is pointing out that there are no rules from God about washing hands and pots, so to condemn one for that is to elevate human traditions to the level of divine commandment. The second part of Christ's response is a direct answer to the Pharisees' question, "Why do your disciples eat with unclean hands?"

Jesus says that it's not what goes into people that defiles them, (unclean hands make unclean food), it's what comes out that defiles them. In other words, it is not ritual or traditions that are the measure of your faithfulness to God, but your heart. "For it is from within, from the human heart," says Jesus, "that evil intentions come," (Mk 7:21). One can follow all the rituals perfectly and still be an evil person. And one can omit the rituals and be of God. The rituals are not from the Almighty, they are human traditions. It's how we live our lives in relationship with God and others that is the true measure of our faithfulness to God.

Christ is saying, "Yes, we eat with unclean hands, but don't judge us on that, but on how we live our lives." The Pharisees don't care for this kind of judgment because while they themselves adhere to the small things, like rituals, they fail on the big ones, like following God's commandments. It is not about forms, but compassion.

Like many of you I watched the beautiful funeral yesterday of Senator Ted Kennedy. Funerals are remarkable events for any person because they are moments when many of the stories and people of one's life are collected together and shared in one place.

I often learn more about someone, even someone I thought I knew well, when I attend their funeral. Senator Kennedy's funeral was no exception. The heartwarming stories, told by countless people from all walks of life, about how he extended himself for others, was remarkable. I was touched by the words of his son Ted Kennedy, Jr. when he said of his father, "He was a devout Catholic whose faith helped him survive unbearable losses and whose teachings taught him that he had a moral obligation to help others in need." This matched what was said by Fr. Donald Mohan at the service who said "It was the private life of faith and of prayer that held the secret to the extraordinary public life of compassion and of service." For Ted Kennedy, his faith in Christ compelled him to champion the causes of the downtrodden.

His son went on to say, "I once told him that he had accidentally left some money -- I remember this when I was a little kid -- on the sink in our hotel room. And he replied, 'Teddy, let me tell you something. Making beds all day is back-breaking work. The woman who has to clean up after us today has a family to feed.'" Ted Kennedy was one of those people who got it. Who recognized that care and compassion for others, even at some expense to ourselves, is one of the key commandments of the gospel.

But wait! You might say, Kennedy was deeply flawed. – and you would be right. He didn't always follow the rules and rituals, and he also didn't always act with justice or compassion. To call his actions at Chappaquiddick and elsewhere less-than-ideal would be an understatement. Yet as his son noted, "He was not perfect. Far from it. But my father believed in redemption and he never surrendered. Never stopped trying to right wrongs, being they the results of his own failings or of ours." That is the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel isn't: "Be perfect at all times. Follow the rules and rituals at all times or you are out." And when you really do cause suffering and hurt to others, the gospel isn't "one strike and you are out." The gospel of Jesus Christ is that you are to do the right thing, love others, show compassion, and when you fail, to pick yourself up, repent, be forgiven, and start over. Senator Kennedy is a model to us for that. He's actually a pretty good model because he is so flawed. Much like King David, who I preached about a few weeks ago, who was another deeply sinful man and who yet is one of God's greatest champions. And there are countless others we could all point to, less famous men and women, who are very imperfect and yet embody the gospel message in their lives. God doesn't call us to be perfect. God doesn't call us to do the rituals or only warm a church pew every Sunday morning. Jesus calls us to go out into the world and love God and each other.

To the extent that rituals and church do that, they are of God. But rituals, or actions, or beliefs (including beliefs about perfection) which hinder loving God and others (including ourselves) are worthless.

As James writes in the Epistle, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress.” Over and over again in scripture, both Old and New Testament, the message is clear: heal the sick, comfort the afflicted, feed the poor, give justice to the weak. That is true religion. The passage from Matthew 25 used in the funeral yesterday was brilliant. In it Jesus separates the sheep from the goats and explains to those who are saved that they are joining him in the Kingdom because “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” [Mt. 25:34-36] When they ask when they did this to him, he says, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” [Mt. 25:40]. In other words, we are to see Christ in all persons and act accordingly with compassion. Every person in our country without healthcare is Jesus. Every person without food is Jesus.

Every person who is treated unjustly in the legal system because of race, color, religion, or creed is Jesus. Every person who dies of a drug overdose is Jesus. Every person who is in prison is Jesus. Every child who lives in poverty is Jesus.

We are to be careful that like the Pharisees we don't honor God only with our lips, for instance: simply mouthing prayers every week, and yet fail in our hearts and actions to care for the poor and oppressed. We must be careful not to look for reasons to deny basic necessities to people because they haven't followed middle class American rules and rituals. Do not equate human standards to God's commandments. And while a desire for personal responsibility is encouraged and desired, personal responsibility finds its greatest flowering within the community. In our country we do not all start out on the same foot with equal opportunities. No man is an island, therefore, as a community, we must offer greater help to those who start with disadvantages. Especially those who have little or no voice. We are all connected to each other. And as a community who love each other, that will mean we will have to sacrifice for others, even if we see no direct benefit to ourselves. We do it because it is right and Christ commands it of us. We do it because ultimately it DOES benefit us. We are all connected.

I bought a great bumper sticker this summer which reads, “God bless the whole world, no exceptions.” This means loving and caring even those who seem unworthy. Jesus even loves the Pharisees, although they annoy him.

Jesus says that it’s not what goes into a person that defiles, it’s not about whether or not you follow human traditions, it’s what comes out of a person that defiles. We are not defiled by how poorly we follow human standards and rituals, but by how poorly we follow God’s laws. It’s not about having the right color skin, or wearing the right clothes, or listening to the right music, or being born in the United States, it’s about living a life of love, mercy, forgiveness, compassion, and charity towards others, including our enemies, and offering praise and thanksgiving to our Creator. These attributes are free and available to all. We all benefit by them. These qualities help us be in right relationship with God and neighbor.

Jesus didn’t come to found a particular denomination, and he isn’t worried too much about the form Christianity takes. He cares what is in our heart. His idea of religion is to love God and care for the poor, the sick, the widowed, the orphan, the stranger, the oppressed and the disenfranchised. And we can all do this whether we are a king or a senator or a middle-class soccer Mom from North Andover.

Amen.