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

Rev. Christie Morrow Wolfe

Assistant to the Bishop, Eastern Synod

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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 honour 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.”

The Gospel reading for today picks up on a conversation between Jesus and the Scribes and Pharisees who had called out Jesus and his followers for not obeying the purity laws prior to eating a meal. The religious officials were objecting to more than simply bad manners. It was common belief that those perceived to have ignored or dismissed the laws were then unclean which left one vulnerable to the forces of evil and ultimately risked the destruction of their lives and livelihood.

You see, for some, the 10 Commandments had evolved into a series of complicated actions tied to the original commandments. There were now rules behind the rules and following the rules took more than just simply obeying them at face value. Prior to eating, hands were to be washed with water kept pure in specific stone jars ... hands had to be held in specific positions at certain times during the ritual – facing down and then up. And if you were touched by someone who hadn't washed, then you were considered to be unclean and needed to wash your entire self, including your clothes. There were additional rules to this ceremonial process but I think you get the picture of how complicated things had become. It's not only the very nature of these additional rules that Jesus calls into question, but also what's motivating the Scribes and Pharisees in terms of their policing of these rules

I think it's important to keep in mind that what Jesus is doing here really was revolutionary. Ritual purity and impurity were considered spiritual states which were inextricably linked to physical processes. In the book of Exodus, before God gave the Israelites the law, God calls the Israelites to be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. The Pharisees took this call very seriously and applied it to all people, meaning it wasn't just the priests who needed to purify themselves. The Pharisees believed this was a direct call from God for EVERYONE to engage in purifying actions. Wars had been fought and people had died upholding these additional rules. So for Jesus and his followers not to engage in appropriate ritual prior to breaking bread, was, for the Pharisees, calling into question Jesus' respect for God's law and, in their minds, threatened to undermine Jewish tradition and way of life.

I think it's also important to remember that Jesus wasn't against upholding the 10 Commandments, in fact, I believe that Jesus was trying to safe-guard against people following the rules behind the rules so rigidly that they ended up ignoring or sometimes disobeying God's original 10 Commandments. Jesus showed the Scribes and Pharisees the irrelevance of elaborate handwashing by saying that THINGS cannot be clean or unclean in a religious sense, but only people can be defiled by their actions and the motivation of their hearts. The Pharisees were making judgments and creating barriers between those they labelled as clean and unclean. As someone who was raised in this tradition, Jesus confronts the religious officials as an insider to the faith, and he calls

into question the validity of these rules and implores the Scribes and Pharisees and everyone listening, to have a look at their own hearts and motivations, first.

The Word of God is really timeless. It is so amazing to me that this ancient gift to us is still so darn applicable. Today, we're learning that the problem with the religious officials of Jesus' day is that according to Jesus, they had become too fixated on the external trappings of what they deemed to be faithfulness that they were neglecting what was happening internally ... in their hearts. Scholar and theologian, Elizabeth Johnson says that *"their efforts to live faithfully were putting up walls of alienation instead of drawing them closer to God and to their neighbours. The rituals they observed created a spiritual hierarchy between the 'clean' and 'unclean.' Instead of expressing the holiness of God, ritual purity became a means of excluding people considered dirty or contaminated."*

Sound familiar? I think this is something that we, as God's people, still wrestle with on a regular basis. How quick are we to sometimes make judgments and draw lines and exclude others? What does this say about the motivation of our own hearts? We'd like to think our hearts are home to our faith in God ... along with our understanding of Scripture and what it is our faith calls us to – to love God and each other. But sometimes our actions are motivated by self-interest and a misguided sense of what God calls us to. Sometimes our own desires get in the way which can lead to things Jesus named in our Gospel reading, like: adultery; theft; avarice; envy; pride; wickedness; deceit; slander, and folly, among other sins. These things do affect our hearts and how we relate to each other and the world ... if our desire for self-satisfaction is allowed to run rampant, we become insatiable consumers of things and people and life. We need the checks and balances of the commandments to keep our hearts focused and our actions grounded so that we can know God's abundance and that we can help others to know it too.

I had a friend, who, when she was dying of cancer, would tell anyone and everyone who stopped in to visit, that she loved them to the actual bottom of her heart. Those were her words ... 'I love you to the actual bottom of my heart.' No one left a visit with her without hearing these words leave her lips. Well, guess what? So does God. And furthermore, God already knows what's in our hearts and what motivates our actions ... Our deepest desires ... our true motivation – both that which is holy and that which is unholy. And even though what God sees isn't always great, God promises us to never leave us or look away. God simply reminds us of the true essence and the heart of our calling as God's people ... to love God and love our neighbours. And when we sin and fall short, God picks us up and calls us to learn and grow and do better, and to trust in God's love and grace because God loves us and wants nothing more for us than live a full, complete and abundant life in God's presence.

Despite what really motivates us some days, God calls us to learn more and love more and trust God more so that we too may know the promise of abundant life that God holds out to each and every one of us. That's the true story behind the story. May it be so with us. Amen.