

SIMPLICITY

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

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time, September 2, 2018,
at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and 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.)

So 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?’ He 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;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.”*

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.’ ...

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, ‘Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.’ ... For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.’

Prayer: Saint Augustine wrote: “My soul’s house is too meager for you to visit; enlarge it.” If this be our feeling and doubt, our perception and pain, then grace us through this service and sermon with your enlarging visit. Amen.

A few weeks ago on vacation in Maine, I had a discussion with a couple who are active and committed Quakers and who lead a Sunday morning meeting on the island where we vacation. I asked them how a Quaker meeting is structured. They explained that the group gathers in silence; there is a designated “elder” who greets for the day and opens the meeting; people then sit in a circle in silence until someone is moved to speak – either as the spirit prompts them or as they share a reading or poem that has been meaningful to them of late. Being a choreographer of worship myself, I asked what happens if someone speaks for too long, dominates the group, or even speaks inappropriately. They said that in such a case, the elder puts his or her hand on the person’s shoulder, and if the person doesn’t take the hint and return to seated silence, the elder asks them to so return.

It is an entirely different way of worshipping than we have – though every minister’s silent fear is that an elder will get up during the sermon, place a hand on our shoulder, and say, “It’s time to sit down.” But like every worship service in every tradition – including our own – the Quaker meeting involves ritual.

I.

Rabbi Jack Moline, our longtime friend who for many years led the synagogue down the street describes what ritual means to him:

It is almost worth being religious [he writes] just to be able to perform the rituals connected with a faith tradition. The prostration during Muslim prayer, the administration of communion during Christian worship, the devotional positions of Hindu spiritual practices, the choreography of Jewish liturgy – all of these engage the participant in a larger endeavor.

Jack goes on to acknowledge what we Calvinist Christians claim to have uniquely discovered, namely, that “Ritual can be rote behavior.” But Jack then adds:

...when [ritual] is imbued with meaning by community and practitioner *alike*, it adds depth of life and reinforces the *values* that produced it in the first place.

Ritual is not something limited to synagogue, mosque, or church. In our nation, this past week, in the very different funerals of John McCain and Aretha Franklin we have seen rituals that are religious and secular, sacred and civic, that bear witness to the role each person has played in the past fifty years of our nation’s life. As Jack writes: “Ritual is not the sole purview of religious communities.”¹

II.

In the passage we read today, the Gospel writer Mark expresses a critique of Jewish ritual Jesus on one level endorses.

- Jewish officials ask Jesus: “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”
- Mark explains, parenthetically, but with a tone of criticism: “...all the Jews do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands.”²

Jesus then enters the conversation, but appears *less concerned* about *specific practices* Mark is critiquing than with the *intention* and *motivation* that lie behind both the *ritual* and its *critique*.

He quotes the Hebrew prophet Isaiah, who is common both to himself and the religious parties he and Mark are criticizing:

*“This people honours me with their lips [Isaiah says],
but their hearts are far from me;*

¹Rabbi Jack Moline, “The Sacred Secular,” Aliba D’Rav, August 13, 2018. Available at <https://www.jackmoline.com/>.

²Scholars I trust do not necessarily think that Mark is always accurate in his understandings and therefore criticisms of Jewish ritual. For example, Dr. Suzie Park of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, told the Moveable Feast Preaching Group this past January: “When Mark critiques ‘all the Jews do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands,’ it is questionable whether that statement represents the views and practices of “all the Jews” versus certain Jewish parties at certain locations.” But this likely discrepancy serves to remind us that when we are in an intense battle between a faction with which we are allied and a faction on the other side of an issue – theological, political, ideological – we often don’t fully understand their views or represent them in a way that does them justice.

Jesus then further emphasizes his focus on the *intention* and *motivation* behind the ritual, rather than the ritual itself:

'Listen to me, [Jesus says]...there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.' ...

For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come... All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.'

Jesus' focus is clearly more on the *heart* than the practice the heart produces.

III.

It is at this point that this somewhat obtuse conversation about ritual can relate to us.

When Jesus shifts from critiquing specific ritual *practices* to focusing on the *human heart*, Jesus follows a common Christian and Greco-Roman custom of his day of actually *listing* the vices he holds up for examination and reform.³ If we listen closely, carefully, thoughtfully, the elements on this list may reflect matters with which we wrestle in our hearts.

The list reads as follows:

- Fornication
- Theft
- Murder
- Adultery
- Avarice
- Wickedness
- Deceit
- Licentiousness
- Envy
- Slander
- Pride
- Folly.

When we listen to these vices one by one, our first reaction may be to say, especially concerning some on the list: – “That’s ridiculous. I don’t do that. These don’t apply to me.” But as we let the list sink into our hearts and minds, we may recognize one or two which give us pause, lead us to wince, to lower our eyes, perhaps to bow our heads. We may come to realize that some items on this list have begun as occasional visitors to our heart, but visitors who, over time, have become long term tenants, with clothes in the closet, special food in the refrigerator, and mail delivered to an address that used to be ours alone.

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In these delightful few days between the end of summer and the beginning of the Fall program year, I have managed to do a massive, long overdue clean out of paper from the files in my desk. In the midst of tossing

³ This is a Greco-Roman custom that Paul would use extensively in spreading Christianity to that culture. See Romans 1:29-31; I Corinthians 6:9-10; Galatians 5:19-21; II Timothy 3:2-5.

articles and memos and communications – most stored or available online – I came across a poem by Stephen Dunn, published nearly a year ago today *The New Yorker*. The poem features a man walking into a large, classy home – with high ceilings, and a well tended garden – has inherited after long years of expectation. Dunn depicts what goes through the man’s heart and mind:

You shouldn’t be surprised that the place
you always sought, and now have been given,
carries with it a certain disappointment.
Here you are, finally inside, and not a friend
in sight. The only gaiety that exists
is the gaiety you’ve brought with you,
and how little you had to bring....
And the exposed wooden beams,
once a main attraction, now feel pretentious,
fit for someone other than you.
But it’s yours now and you suspect
you’ll be known by the paintings you hang,
the books you shelve, and no doubt
your need to speak about the wallpaper
as if it weren’t your fault. Perhaps that’s why
wherever you go these days
vanity has followed you like a clownish dog....⁴

Theft? Murder? Probably not. But envy? Avarice? Folly? May even this list of vices in scripture lead us to “apply the medicine of scripture, every [person] to [our] own sores.”⁵

IV.

This honest exposure of who and what has taken up residence in our hearts is not in the Bible to simply take us on a tour of the unwanted and unpleasant. It is rather a *necessary prelude* for the cleansing, conversion, healing of the heart.

While in this particular passage Jesus is more in the mode of *exposing* a human propensity than *prescribing* a way out of it, the other three passages the lectionary designates for our reading today join Jesus’ focus on the heart and bear witness to what the human heart is capable of doing when its chambers are open to God.

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In all literature, religious or secular, there is no more beautiful expression of what the heart can experience than the love that is found in the Song of Songs. The second chapter opens with a woman calling out to the one whom her soul loves:

The voice of my beloved!
Look, he comes,
leaping upon the mountains,
bounding over the hills.

⁴ Stephen Dunn, “The Inheritance,” *The New Yorker* 9/4/2017.

⁵ William Tyndale, prefixed to the translation of the Pentateuch, 1530; quoted by Brevard S. Childs in *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), unnumbered page following the Table of Contents.

My beloved is like a gazelle
or a young stag.
Look, there he stands
behind our wall,
gazing in at the windows,
looking through the lattice.

Her lover then responds:

‘Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away;
for now the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth;
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtle-dove
is heard in our land...
Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away.’⁶

Jewish and Christian writers over the centuries have seen the love between these two human beings as akin to the love God has for the church and the love each of us can have for God. That love begins when we open our hearts to the possibility of God’s existence, to God’s active presence in the world, to God’s presence and care for our lives. God’s love is “gazing in at the windows [of our hearts], looking through the lattice.” We must let God’s love in.

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Likewise, Psalm 45, described by the Biblical editor as “a love song,” begins with a citizen expressing love for her earthly ruler:

My heart overflows with a goodly theme...
Grace is poured upon your lips;
therefore God has blessed you for ever.

That love for a human leader is then is transformed and re-directed into a higher love for God:

Your throne, O God, endures for ever and ever.
Your royal sceptre is a sceptre of *equity*;
You love *righteousness* and hate *wickedness*.⁷

To be sure, to equate love for a ruler with love for God is fraught with danger, but when a ruler embodies such character traits as *equity* and *righteousness*, such love can be a harbinger of the greater love for God.

⁶ Song of Songs 2:8-12, 13b.

⁷ Psalm 45:1a, 2bc, 6-7a.

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Finally, from the New Testament Epistle of James:

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning....he gave us birth by the word of truth...

Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls....⁸

Again, touched by the Word “from above,” our hearts welcome the God who seeks to enter.

V.

When I drew up the sermon schedule several months ago and read these words of critique from Jesus, I knew I wanted to get at the matters of the heart that lay behind his words. I chose the title “Simplicity” because I knew that whatever I ended out saying, I wanted to stress that in the final analysis faith is a matter of the heart, a matter that is ultimately simple.

Our hearts are large.
No matter how much they have become cluttered
By the list Christ enumerates,
There is room in them
For the Word he implants from above,
And for the love that Word instills within us.
Such love, once implanted, will grow,
And will crowd out all other elements on the list.

For such growth to happen,
We have to let that love in.
But we *can* let it in.

It is ultimately a simple matter:
Let the love of God in.
Let that love in.
Let it in.

Amen.

⁸ James 2:17, 18, 21.