
Sermon

Proper 17, Year B
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The Cathedral of St. Philip

Some of the most vivid memories I have of first grade are of the rituals and customs involving food. At lunch time, we washed our hands at the specially positioned child-high sinks being particularly careful to use plenty of soap and water, never knowing which of us would be called on to show our hands to the teacher. After washing, we would line up beside our desks and follow the designated leader, single file down the hall and along the covered walkway from the first, second, and third grade building to the cafeteria at the center of the campus. After going through the lunch line and receiving our trays of food, we would sit as a class with our teacher, Mrs. Goss. She made sure we had and used the proper utensils, asking politely for salt or pepper, and chewing with our mouths closed. The class also joined in teaching the rules by using little chants "" you may remember this one: "Buddy, Buddy, if you are able, take your elbows off the table." So both Mrs. Goss and the members of the class ensured conformity with the rules of cafeteria etiquette. Lunch was as much about instructing us in the rituals as it was about eating and fellowship. The customs gave us the norms for behaving as members of the group; indeed they were the defining characteristics of the group and setting apart those who were "in" from those who were "out."

For the past five weeks, we have been hearing lessons from the gospel of John. Jesus talks to us about being the bread that comes down from heaven to give life to the world; his flesh as being heavenly food like the manna God gave the children of Israel in the wilderness. After five weeks of John, we return today to the gospel of Mark. Let me refresh your memory of where we were in that gospel. We had heard a number of miraculous stories: the feeding of the 5000, Jesus walking on the water and calming of the storm for his disciples; stories that drew the attention of the people of Galilee so that all who were around Jesus sought to touch the fringes of his garments in order to be healed and to be in the presence of the miracle worker"" a presence that had the power to transform as many as were willing into his disciples.

In our lesson this morning the Pharisees and Scribes travel from Jerusalem to the northwestern corner of the Sea of Galilee to confront Jesus. They are the leaders of the religious establishment who live in the shadow of the holiest place of Judaism - the Temple; they are the most fastidious about maintaining the traditions of the Torah - both the written law and the oral customs passed down from one generation to the next. The Pharisees and Scribes are particularly concerned about discerning who is "in" and who is "out" by observing who keeps the traditions - and all who fail to comply are viewed as a threat to the very existence of the Jewish people. When they meet Jesus and the disciples the first thing they notice is that some of his disciples fail to wash their hands before eating. They are eating with defiled - or another translation would be - with "common" hands. You see the washing referred to here is not for the purpose of cleansing away dirt, but is the ceremonial washing that mimicked the ritual washing of the priests who served at the altar of God - in a sense making all Jewish people part of the priesthood.

Jesus does not respond to the question of "why" his disciples fail to keep the rituals "" he simply testifies to what he witnesses in the lives of the religious leaders. They are hypocrites. They obey the outward forms of religion without changing their practices in relating to one another, failing to be in right relationships. The root of the word hypocrite means "to act out a theatrical role" - to pretend. This is what Jesus observes - the leaders are only playing at their faith. To

deny who we really are may be the most onerous act in the sight of God. James says it a little differently "" they are hearers and not doers of the word, they know the forms of religion without allowing the practices to shape their faith to change their hearts - their rituals are not transforming them into the men and women God wants them to be. At the core of the argument between Jesus and the Pharisees is the failure of these religious leaders to understand that "life before God, in God, and because of God demands change in the way his followers live their lives." And in keeping with this understanding is the reality that none of us can do anything within ourselves to make our relationship with God right, or acceptable, or "uncommon." Our salvation and life in God comes from outside ourselves.

As Christians we are made acceptable through the gift of grace we receive from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In spite of our worldly success and accomplishments we are spiritually dead without the grace of God which brings us from death to life. The expected response to this gift is that our hardened hearts will be changed; transformed into soft, pliable hearts that look with compassion on the widow, the orphan, and the stranger "" the least and the little in the kingdoms of this world.

You may notice that Jesus doesn't condemn or show disdain for the rituals and traditions of his heritage? My teacher, Mrs. Goss, understood that customs and traditions assisted even 1st graders in entering and becoming members of society. Jesus claims that since nothing outside a person can defile us or make us common, therefore our rituals, when approached with a right attitude, are powerful instruments that can change our hearts, aiding us in the process of our transformation. We are formed by our rituals and liturgy; molded by the Word and sacraments, through our common prayer and our life in the community of faith. It is through the pouring of water on our outer bodies that the grace of God brings about a change in our inner being. Once we are made a new creation in baptism, we are called to respond - growing into the people that God already sees us as being, and taking our place in the ongoing transformation of the world as God's holy, "uncommon," and royal priesthood.

Our Orthodox Jewish friends to this day practice ritual purity laws. You may have friends like I do who on rising from bed in the morning, and always before breaking bread, wash their hands. It is a means of sanctifying life, time, and material objects to pause and give thanks to God, to see the common as uncommon, as holy and set apart as a gift from God. Life, food, and the fruit of our labor are all gifts; and they are to be shared with the rest of the human family.

Our liturgy today, with it's prescribed prayers we pray, our manual acts of devotion, the particular clothing and vessels we use, and the bread and wine we offer. All these rituals mold and form us. The words and actions remind us of who we are, they soften our hearts and change us from being common to uncommon - to being a holy people. Week by week we are being changed, always becoming what God wants us to be and hopefully doing what God wants us to do.

Father Robert Capon, the Episcopal priest, theologian, and writer, contends that whatever the Gospel of Jesus Christ is; it is not a religion. It is in fact the announcement of the end of religion for religion is concerned with "our" making ourselves right with God. In short religion is human-kinds attempt to control God. Jesus' incarnation, death, and resurrection offers us an alternative to religion - in Jesus we are given what we cannot do for ourselves, we are given new life and a continuing relationship with and in God and the gift of ongoing forgiveness through his Word and Sacraments. Our response is to proclaim by word and example this good news to the world. As one of the collects from Morning Prayer reminds us, "to know God is eternal life and to serve God is perfect freedom." May God grant us true religion - that is life lived in relationship to his Son Jesus which we in turn share with one another! Amen.

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