

Year B Proper 22 2024 Getting Your Hands Dirty Mark 7 vv1 to 8 and 14 to 15 and 21 to 23

It's been quite a while since we last heard from Mark so let's remind ourselves of where we left off. Jesus has fed a huge crowd of over 5000 people with just five loaves of bread and two fish. He then walked on water to join his disciples who'd started off across the Sea of Galilee without him. When they landed on the other side, they were swarmed by sick people whom he healed, even if they simply touched the fringe of his cloak. Keep these things in mind – they are going to come into play as we talk about the conversation Jesus has today with the Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem.

“In vain do they worship me,” Jesus quotes from Isaiah. “In vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.” Jesus is directing at the scribes and Pharisees a very serious accusation: “You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.” He is very harshly criticizing the way in which they practice their religion and all because they asked him why his disciples are not washing their hands before they eat. Why is this?

Let's talk “religion” for a moment. If you were to define religion for me, you might say something like “religion is a system of beliefs about the God we worship”. If you were going to “talk religion”, chances are that conversation would be long and complicated and maybe even more like an argument depending on who you were “talking religion” with. But that's an idea of what “religion” is that has developed over the last few centuries and I need you to shove that idea of religion out of your head. The word that we hear translated as the word “religion” in the New Testament – like we heard in the letter of James today – is the Greek word

*threskeia*. And *threskia* means “worship as expressed in ritual acts.” Religion is external, it is what we do *in* worship and *because* we worship God. Religion isn’t talk, it’s action. Religion isn’t only about beliefs, it’s what we do because of those beliefs. Religion isn’t all in the mind, it’s in the hands that help, the voices that build each other up, the feet that take us to those in need. People looking at us must *see* our religion. And what does Jesus see from the Pharisees?

Jesus sees very devoted men, devoted to pleasing God by living the most honorable lives they knew how. They dedicated their lives to following the laws – the Torah – and they had also developed hundreds of spoken laws beyond the written Torah, spoken laws we hear today referred to as “the traditions of the elders.” These laws held them together as a community and reminded the people of their Jewish identity, the people of God. Sounds like a good thing, right? Yet when the Pharisees ask Jesus why he is not teaching his disciples to follow these laws, Jesus calls them hypocrites.

The problem is that all of those additional laws, that were meant to help them worship God more fully, were actually separating them from God. The commandments that God put into place through Moses – the 10 commandments – are designed to help people be in right relationship with God and with each other. Jesus sums them up in two great commandments: love God, love neighbour. The hundreds of human-made laws had become the focus rather than the vehicle into right relationship. Worse yet, those human traditions were being used by the scribes and Pharisees as an excuse to avoid the bigger commandments of God. This is what has Jesus so angry and upset. While the leaders are holding the people to a high moral and ethical standard, they are not

maintaining that level themselves. We skip over the verses in which Jesus provides an example of this. The fifth commandment is to honour your father and mother. The Pharisees had created a law concerning giving money and other offerings to God – to the temple, in other words. However, they were encouraging people to give their money to them in the temple *instead of* supporting their parents in their elder years. They were abandoning God's command in favour of their own.

There is still one more big problem Jesus is having with how the scribes and Pharisees are practicing their religion. These hundreds of laws they had created over the years were mostly about what to eat and how to eat it and how to maintain spiritual purity. The handwashing law was one of purity – priests were to ritually wash their hands before serving God at the altar – it is a symbol of innocence and inner cleanliness. It had nothing to do with wanting to get rid of dirt or germs for health reasons. This was about spiritual cleanliness. Dirty hands meant a dirty heart. If you were “dirty” for any reason, you were forbidden to be a part of the worship of God. If you touched a leper, a sick person, a dead person, a pig, and so on, you were unclean and had to undergo a lengthy ritual to become clean once more.

These laws were highly exclusionary. Sick people and most poor people were just automatically unclean all of the time. This meant being unwelcome among the other people. No hugs, no hellos, no help. The temple itself, meant to be the unifying symbol of God's presence, the place where heaven and earth met and became one, the place that was to be the light for all nations, the temple itself had become a symbol of division and exclusion. Non-Jewish visitors were allowed just inside the outer gate of the Temple. Women got a little closer. Next, came the

men closer still. Then there was the area for the priests and, finally, the “Holy of Holies” where the ark of God was kept. Sick people didn’t even make it past the outer gate. This separation of people into various groups most definitely led to different attitudes toward and treatment of the people in those groups. The closer your group was to the Holy of Holies in the temple, the more respect you got and the better the treatment you got in society. Those on the outside got no respect and were ignored, left to suffer and rot. This is not at all what was intended by love God and love your neighbour.

Jesus has been showing us what it does mean. And it means getting your hands dirty. The Pharisees have been practicing a religion in which the human-made traditions are receiving more devotion than God, the human-made rules are dividing rather than uniting, and the human-made rules are being used as an excuse to not do the really important work of worship – the true worship of God, true religion that builds relationship with God, people, and planet. Building relationship requires getting your hands dirty. Thousands of people had sat down to eat with Jesus...he broke the bread and shared it without regard for their gender, their status, or their health conditions. No exclusion. Everyone ate together. This was simply not done in that society. Everyone had a place and stayed in their place: Important people, less important people, and those who did not even get an invitation. Jesus says, “Unh-uh...not in God’s kingdom. Everyone is fed on equal ground at the same table in God’s kingdom.”

Jesus has been touching sick people and letting sick people touch him and his clothing. He is so ritually unclean, he’d have to bath after bath after bath to suit the standards of the Pharisees. He would be banned from worshipping in the

temple for a very long time. Jesus – banned from worship of God – due to ritual uncleanness. Again, Jesus says, “Unh-uh...not in God’s kingdom. Everyone is welcome and cared for in God’s kingdom.”

His message for the Pharisees is wrongness, brokenness, sin...comes from the inside. People are the cause of their distance from God, their inability to be in right relationship with God, through their own behaviours and their own attitudes. We hear this today and we think, “Of course, we know that.” We know having supper with someone with COVID may give us COVID but it doesn’t make us spiritually unhealthy or unclean. We know that eating porkchops does not damage our relationship with God. We know that women and children and sick people and poor people have just as much access to God as everyone else. But do we? Do we really?

Jesus is telling the Jewish leaders that what comes out of them is what defiles...their focus on their human-made rules that exclude and hurt and take their devotion away from God – that is what defiles them, that is what is keeping them from right relationship with God. It is easy for us to hear Jesus telling them all of this and agree with him completely – what comes out is what defiles. But...have we noticed what is coming out of us?

Our human-made rules have done a lot of excluding and have caused a lot of hurt. Life-long Anglican women were once turned away from the table when they got a divorce. That is one example in a long history of exclusion. What about our “traditions”. Those are human-made rules too and many “traditions” are simply local customs that we can take or leave and are not a necessary part of right worship of God but, just try to change them or get rid of them. Many harsh words

and hurt feelings have come as a result of local customs: what hymns to sing and when, how many candles to have in the sanctuary, what food and how much for coffee hour, what to do with the offering plate after it's been passed around...

Jaroslav Pelikan makes a helpful distinction for us between tradition and "traditionalism". Tradition is important. "Tradition is the living faith of the dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living." (Aisthorpe, *Rewilding the Church*, p.174). We have a 'living faith' and, as faithful followers of Christ we must interact with tradition, "that we learn from and build on what is valuable from our [sisters and brothers in past generations]" We reflect on how others have responded to God and God's action and become part of tradition. (*Rewilding*, p.175).

Traditionalism is different. "Not only does traditionalism 'give tradition a bad name', it operates by disguising itself as tradition. Steve Aisthorpe writes, "I remember when my brother first began work in a bank in the 1980s, he needed to learn how to distinguish genuine currency from counterfeit. He was not trained to recognise the features of every different forgery. Rather, he learned to recognise the hallmarks of the real thing. The best defence against traditionalism is a well-developed love of tradition, the living faith of the dead" (*Rewilding*, p.175).

How do we know when we are clinging to worthless customs that are misshaping or killing our church? How do we know if our human-made rules have taken precedence in our hearts over God's rules? Part of the answer is actually self-evident. If joy and compassion and generosity are being seen and felt we are getting something right. If hurtful words, exclusion, and division are present, we need to do some changing. When our devotion separates us from others, it then

also separates us from God. Jesus shows us how things are done in God's kingdom – welcome, equality, sharing, forgiveness, healing of brokenness.

We won't always get things exactly right. God angrily told his people long ago – in words that ring true today – when people were “practicing righteousness” in the temple but then were fighting, oppressing, cheating others in their daily lives, God said: the religion I choose is not the empty show of devotion but rather, the religion I choose is to loose the bonds of injustice, let the oppressed go free, share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house (loosely based on Is.58:6-7). We won't always get things exactly right but an openness to change is an important ingredient in our journey to live more fully as God's people in God's kingdom.

The religion we practice together in our liturgies is one of deep joy and hope, of radical welcome, and abundant generosity. In the feeding of the 5000, in touching the sick, Jesus shows us what that religion looks like beyond these walls. So when the world sees our religion, let them see us getting our hands dirty.