Doers of the Word with Heart

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Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23 Russell Mitchell-Walker

James 1: 17-27

Many years ago, when I was a young adult working in the Rocky Mountain House area in the oilfields of Alberta, I participated in a conservative Bible study group, which turned out to be quite fundamentalist. This was in 1984, and the United Church was making the news because it’s national General Council was meeting and discussing sexuality and homosexuality, including whether lesbian and gay people could be ministers. This was big news in the media. The study group was concerned about this and after some discussion at one session, it was agreed that the next meeting we had we would “share scripture” about homosexuality. Now at that time I was discerning whether it was right or wrong for me to be gay and in ministry, which I was heading to for training in the fall. I was reading lots and attending workshops when I could that the church was offering. So that week, I boned up on the few passages that are alleged to address homosexuality and the interpretations that present a more liberal, contextual, inclusive viewpoint. However, when I got to the session with this Bible study group, the leader who was preparing that week, handed out slips of paper with scripture and verse on it. No discussion. That was the answer. I couldn’t even tell you what the passages were, whether it was some of the so called anti-homosexual clobber verses or not. I was just so shocked that that was it. There was no consideration of heart or feelings, of impact, or perspectives. The bible says it, end of story. This is the kind of behaviour and thinking that Jesus was challenging of the Pharisees in our gospel reading today.

Jesus is gathered with his disciples and were eating, but had not washed their hands as was the expected custom among the Jewish community. The Pharisees understood that the Law God gave them was a gift, just as God’s choosing and calling of Israel was a gift. Their observance of the law, such as this handwashing before a meal, was meant to be a witness to the nations around them and to give glory to God. They interpreted the laws concerning priests to also apply to all of God’s people in all aspects of life. When they asked why Jesus’ disciples were not following the tradition of the elders, Jesus’ reaction to them was to call them hypocrites and refer to a scripture in Isaiah which includes a reference to people honouring God, but their hearts being far from God. So, it seems Jesus is criticizing the Pharisees for becoming so focused on the external acts that they have neglected to examine their own hearts. They are so focused on the Law that they have missed the importance of caring for the community. One of the challenging realities of this is emphasized by the fact that many in the Jewish community were living in such poverty that in numerous places there was no access to clean water to wash themselves with. Thus, they were excluded because of circumstances beyond their control. This is something we may need to be careful of in our communities as we live with and discern about the realities of being in communities, in a society, of vaccinated and unvaccinated people, regardless of the reasons for it. How do we create safe, loving communities of all, without excluding those who can’t or won’t be vaccinated?

Maybe there is a link here with the passage from James. In the passage James is talking about being faithful and living out God’s love in our lives. When he says we need to be doers of the word and not just hearers, he is not saying that what we do saves us, for he begins by naming that every generous gift is from above, which includes salvation. He clarifies that the doing to be faithful, or religious, is caring for the widows and orphans in distress, the vulnerable. He is writing in the context of and concerned about the wealthy of society and the control they have, and the disparity between the rich and the poor. That disparity is even more prevalent in our society today. Where in James’ time of 150CE, the top one percent in Rome controlled 16% of the wealth; in Canada today, the one percent control 26.5% of the wealth and in the US the one percent controls 40%. James says what can save our souls is the implanted word – God’s message of love and compassion. He too challenges those who think they are religious but do not bridle their tongues and deceive their hearts. He refers us to God’s perfect law, which many scholars believe is a reference to loving God with all your heart, your soul, your mind and your strength and to love your neighbour as yourself. Rather than seeing God's law as a set of rules, it sees God's law as a call for justice which gives birth to something new. It is freeing. This is the groundwork for what he calls true religion – caring for the widows and orphans in distress.

Who are the widows and orphans of today? With all the images and information coming from Afghanistan these past few weeks, it is not hard to see how women and children there are incredibility vulnerable and in distress. It is difficult to see these images, and wonder how we can help. There no doubt will be a need for and increased requests for, supporting refugees. While some of our congregations would not have the capacity to do this on our own, perhaps there may be interest and capacity to support a refugee in need together. As we hear reports of the Taliban claiming to be more inclusive and supportive of women in leadership roles, there is also the caveat ‘within the limits of Islamic law’. In this context we are talking about a fundamentalist interpretation of Islamic law, which too often is done without heart or caring for people’s needs. It is similar to what Jesus was criticizing the Pharisees of. It will be important for us Westerners and Christians to take care not to hear the Taliban’s interpretation as reflecting all of Islam. It would be the same as saying the Ku-Klux-Klan or other extreme right wing Christians are representative of all Christianity. These are all examples of literalism and fundamentalism without heart. Many might even say without love of your neighbour.

In the gospel story, we have Jesus challenging laws that have become part of the culture, sometimes at the cost of moral law or living out God’s love. Biblical commands should never take precedence over what is compassionate and caring. There are laws and understandings that have changed over the years. It used to be believed that disabilities were caused because of the family’s sin. Even though Jesus challenged this understanding in John 9, when the disciples asked this about a man born blind, it wasn’t until about 50 years ago that we started changing our treatment of people with disabilities. We are still learning how to be more compassionate and caring in our relationships and accommodations with those who have disabilities. It can be helpful for us to remember that we are all temporarily able bodied!

The same can be said with regard to issues of Gender and sexism, and racism. Despite the eradication of slavery, the closing of residential schools, and many other steps forward, our system is still entrenched in white supremacy and colonialism, that impacts us all. Until we can see addressing these challenges as essential to living out our faith, and loving our neighbour, we may be like the pharisees who were caught in a system, unable to see the impact of their passion for following the law, on their fellow human beings.

Life is much more than scripture and verse, and living out our faith means engaging our heart and minds, as well as engaging with scripture. May we take seriously James’ message to be doers of the word, and be part of a ‘religion that is pure and undefiled before God’ which cares for the vulnerable, loving our neighbours as ourselves.