

2 September 2018  
Whitsuntide Fifteen  
St Mark 7: 1 - 8, 14 - 15, 21 - 23

From Proverbs 9 we read: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Hold on to that thought, and we'll come back to it in a few minutes.

Today is one of those relatively rare Sunday mornings when all three of our readings and the Psalm follow the same and extremely clear theme - that of living joyously. There are many ways of exploring these passages, but a simple one is to see them as a reminder that there a multitude of ways we can experience an abundance of joy in our life. The only thing that truly matters is that we grant ourselves the freedom and encourage others to find their own forms of joy. In turn, that means the worst thing we can do is try to impose too many of our ideas on others.

Part my delight in reading about other people is finding out what they did to create joy in their life. For example, H L Menken and Mike Royko were both hard-driven, curmudgeonly old school news reporters and writers. For Menken, his weekly chamber music with some friends was his joy. Royko was absolutely devoted to playing 16 inch softball with several Chicago teams. Some of you have shared the joy you get from participating in the visual arts - painting, stained glass, needle work. For others, it is travel, perhaps the beach, fishing and hunting, or something else.

It appears that for Jesus, much of His great joy was spending time with his companions, meeting and encountering other people and caring for them, and introducing the Kingdom of God. Look at all of the indications sprinkled throughout the Gospels - having a meal with people, talking with them. Helping people whenever the opportunity arose, even if it was inconvenient, even when it was the day of rest was joy to him.. . Even if the disciples were not a group of well-mannered Anglican choirboys on a church outing, but sometimes difficult, Jesus loved being with his friends.

But then, in this morning's passage from St Mark, we see this discomfoting encounter with the Pharisees. Let's look at that more closely.

You and I have been conditioned to think of the Pharisees as the black hat boys. If this was a western, central costuming would have them in black clothes, wearing a black hat, instructing them not to shave, have a cigarette drooling from the corner of their mouth, drinking cheap

whiskey, and leering at people. We often had the idea from Sunday school teachers that they were bullies, and the arch-enemy of Jesus who would win a battle on Good Friday.

Forget that one dimensional nonsense. These men had God at the centre of their life. From the commentaries on the Old Testament, found in the Talmud and other books, they were sincere about what they were doing. They clearly understood that the land of Israel was holy, sacred, and a magnificent gift from God. They saw their duty to protect it, and sincerely believed the best, perhaps even the only way to accomplish it, was to rely on strict obedience the Laws of the first five books of Moses - the Torah. Their ethos was that if we obey the law, and if we can lead others to obey it, then we will protect the Holy Land and all that it represents. Above all, they wanted to do the right thing. There were perhaps six different factions of Pharisees, each with their own subset of ideas and ways to accomplish their goal. They squabbled far more with each other than with Jesus or anyone else.

They were attempting to protect the Holy Land, their traditions and purity of worship and life by using the Law and their own rule books as a wall or a fence as a defence. It was a mentality of holding on to the past, keeping different ideas and practices and bay, and quite literally dividing people from being insiders or outsiders. The good were our type of people; the wicked were NOT our type of people.

They meant well, they were sincere, but it was a failure. And worse, they pushed their agenda so hard, tried to build so many protective laws, that it erupted into the disastrous First Jewish Revolt of 66 AD. And, not having learned their lessons, they tried again in 132 AD.

The harsh reality is that walls, regardless of their type, don't work very long, nor very well. Chin, the first emperor of China, built a 5000 mile wall to keep out non-Chinese, but it cut off the exchange of ideas, and his country regressed. Hadrian built a wall to keep the Scots out of England, but the Scots waited until the Romans turned their backs and climbed over the wall. The dumbest one was by Peter Stuyvesant in New Amsterdam who authorized a mile long wall to keep out the Indians. They looked at it and asked, "Seriously?" and just walked around it. Putting up spiritual walls doesn't work very well, either, whether it is a series of onerous rules about who can become a member or what they must believe or what they may not believe. For centuries the world has been torn apart by this - Protestants and Catholics during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the 30 Years War, and endless witch-hunts.

That's the same type challenge we see Jesus and the disciples facing, when the Pharisees told him they didn't properly wash their hands before eating. He calls them on it. You are being hypocritical with your words and answers. God doesn't need you to protect Him. And God doesn't need you to protect the sanctity of the Holy Land. He is perfectly capable of doing that. Your job is to look at your heart, and how you care for the people around them. Are they minions to serve you, or do you see them as brothers and sisters given life by the same Lord God who gave you life? Look at your attitudes because your attitudes will direct your action. Are you loving God and truly loving your neighbour, or just yourself?

Today, just as we see in so many other examples, Jesus led from the front, by example. Put down the rule books; step back from the one-size fits all policies and procedures manual and open your hearts. That blind man isn't being punished for his sons, much less the sins of his ancestors. Go up to him, befriend him, see what you can do for him.

Put other people first.

The poor aren't sinners. They are poor. You've got resources. Share with them like God has shared His good gifts with you. The hungry might not be your immediate responsibility, according to your rules and traditions, but you've got food - share it. And clothing. Give those in need a hand, not a miniscule hand-out. That applies to the lonely, young, old, minorities, and anyone else.

Quit checking the rules, quit looking over your shoulder because you're worried what your friends will say - just do what you already know to be the right thing. Love and care for people. Frankly, I don't think Jesus accomplished much that day. The Pharisees did not have a sudden epiphany ah-ha moment that led to a radical conversion. As for Jesus and the disciples, what had begun as a fun picnic disintegrated into a dismal end. The ending was disappointing all around, but quite literally, thank God St Mark recorded the event and some of the dialogue, because the message about attitudes and resulting action remain with us to this day.

Today at 10 we will be singing two hymns. One is by Congregational minister and prolific writer Washington Gladden who had a true servant's heart for the poor, the unskilled work force, the destitute living in inner city slums. His heart and mind were acutely aware of their pain. He was the spiritual godfather of many reform movements. The other was written William Carpenter, a high church Anglican who was truly part of the establishment in the church and the British monarchy, serving as a chaplain to Queen Victoria, King Edward VII, and King George VI. Both

of these clergymen, even though they came from very different backgrounds, could clearly see that when people are hurting, there is something wrong, and it is the moment for Christians to break down walls and barriers to lend a hand.

We learn Christ's message from worship, from our hymns, from the Word of God. But we also learn it from other people whose hearts are full of compassion. From secretaries and custodians, from the wait staff in a restaurant, from truck drivers, farmers, and from artists, we learn because far better than many others, they see the needs of other people. They see it up close, personal, grass roots. They see the pain in the world, and yet the persistence of hope. The most generous person leaving a tip in a restaurant is probably a single mother because she knows the daily struggle of the woman bringing her the meal. We learn it from the farmer who daily sees the sinful damage done to the environment.

Look, this has absolutely nothing to do with political parties and politics. I am sickened and heart-broken that almost every conversation in our world today seems to be filtered through politics. It is a wall that divides people. It is a smokescreen to stop conversation, divert our attention, and ice over our hearts and harden our attitudes. It is an agenda that stifles compassion and care because we are afraid that doing the right thing might not receive everyone's approval. In houses of worship, political rhetoric builds walls. We don't have time for that in God's house. It's not because politics are dirty, but because they can get in the way of doing what is right. We are called to be Christ's conduit to the community. Conduits, whether for water or electricity, carry energy from one place to another. As Christ's conduit to the community, we carry the power of his love, his grace, his mercy, his compassion to others.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. That doesn't mean we are to be terrified of God, because we are assured God loves us. The word 'fear' is Elizabethan English for reverence, honour, and humility before God. That is where we start, asking God for the right attitude so that our eyes and hearts are opened, and then with wise and loving hearts and minds, adjust our attitude to just do the right thing.