

Song of Solomon 2:8-13

Psalm 45:1-2, 7-10

James 1:17-27

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

Almost every single Sunday when we gather here for weekly worship, we hear passages of scripture that we have heard multiple times during our lifetimes. Such is the case this morning. We've also heard multiple sermons preached on these very same scripture passages, so the question becomes: What more or what else is there to say about this passage? That's the challenge. What's the new piece of insight that we can gather from this very familiar story? At the very outset, we can say with some certainty that: "This passage is *not* about ritual defilement or Hebrew law." This passage, like so many others, is about our relationship with God and the limitations of our own humanity. Those two things.

We know that it's not unusual for Jesus to take on the Pharisees and the scribes. He seems to do that with some regularity, but he doesn't jump on them out of the blue. His verbal blasts at the Jewish religious hierarchy are almost always in response to some challenge they have made to him or a criticism they've made of those who are following of him. This time it's about the fact that Jesus' followers have not washed their hands before eating their food. How many of us are equally guilty? But in this case this isn't just a question of personal hygiene. The Pharisees are complaining because Jesus' followers are not following the traditions of their elders when it comes to eating food. These traditions reflect the rules that God gave to the Hebrews while they were in the wilderness. These rules were originally meant to keep the Hebrew people safe from disease and contamination. Following these rules was a sign of respect to God and could easily have been a matter of life or death. But many of the dietary rules of Jesus' day had developed over the centuries as a result of the interpretation that the Pharisees and scribes made around God's original set of rules...and not *all* the Jews in Jesus' day followed those interpretations. These "traditions of the elders" were seen as a way to "build a fence around the law," to preserve the Jewish faith and way of life, especially in the midst of Roman occupation. The concern of the Pharisees and scribes when they saw Jesus' disciples eating with unwashed hands was about something much more serious than proper hygiene. They suspected that the carelessness of Jesus and his disciples with regard to the traditions of the elders threatened to undermine respect for God's law. The elders in any society don't like to see the young ones giving up cultural staples.

But Jesus hit the nail on the head when he quoted Isaiah [29:13-14] "The Lord said: Because these people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote: so I will again

do amazing things with this people, shocking and amazing. The wisdom of their wise shall perish, and the discernment of the discerning shall be hidden.” Quite a threat! Jesus doesn’t seem to think much of people who follow the rules by rote, but have lost all understanding of the original intent of the rule...and more importantly...the original law imposed by God upon His people which is: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your might and all your soul and your neighbor as well.” Jesus is pretty blunt in letting the Pharisees know that God cares more about our relationship with God and our relationships with other people more than God cares about “the rules.” So this lecture from Jesus isn’t about defilement, although the passage ends with Jesus giving us a list of all the ways we slip into defiling ourselves by indulging the evil impulses within us. This message from Jesus...like so many other messages from Jesus...is about hypocrisy...saying you believe one thing and then behaving in direct contradiction to those words. As my husband used to say, “Hate your next door neighbor, but don’t forget to say grace at the dinner table!”

Before we get too carried away with dismissing the Pharisees for their hypocrisy, we should pause for a moment and think of our own traditions and our own set of rules about how we do things. We tend to get hung up on our own religious rituals that set us apart from the rest of society overlooking the deeper truth that the living out of the heart of our religious tradition would instead call us to be an alternative to the larger ‘world’ of our society by choosing and living out right relationships: kindness over cruelty, compassion over condemnation, mercy over retribution, forgiveness over criticism, and acceptance over rejection. This calls for an abandonment of gossip as well. As Christians, that’s what Jesus calls us to do, but our culture seems to work against it as well as our own internal impulses. Sometimes we get so caught up in the proper symbolism of our worship that we forget the deeper demands of that faith to serve God by doing good and holding in check our own selfish desires so that we might better direct our energies and our resources toward the welfare of others and the larger community. Jesus charges us to demonstrate what he has taught us, his followers. When the larger community gazes at us, what does it see? How does our larger culture view Christianity?

This exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees is not so much about defilement as it is about hypocrisy...theirs and ours. Hypocrisy refers to the disconnect between the moral values and standards that we profess to believe and those that we actually practice in our behavior. The Greek root for hypocrisy means “pretending” or “acting out a theatrical role.” Hypocrisy is a negation of authentic life. It is life acted out to fool others...and to maybe fool ourselves. It’s a role we assume and pretend to be that is not really us. It is a façade. It is a denial of our true selves in favor of what we would *like* to be. Religious hypocrisy is the most destructive kind of all because it uses sacred teachings about Truth itself to elevate self-deception. What Jesus is pointing to in this exchange with the Pharisees in the presence of his followers is the

quintessential human struggle to discover and maintain the integrity of the self...making the inside match the outside...or vice versa...making the outside match the inside.

And Jesus warns us to beware when our piety separates us from others, for then it is also separating us from God. When we are separated from others because of the rules of our faith and the traditions of our worship, that's a warning signal. When we turn unbaptized people away from the communion table, we need to dwell on and contemplate and pray about whether or not that's what Jesus wants us to do to our fellow humans.

There is no religious law or tradition that can protect us from the darkness that lurks within our own hearts. Our own hearts are our biggest and most potent threats as well as our biggest and most potent assets. This text shows us that Jesus sees clearly the ugliness of human hearts, yet he does not turn away. He sees right through our highly edited versions of ourselves, knows what lurks in our hearts, yet still loves us and still sees our assets. In the larger story of the Gospel, he shows us what true faithfulness is by daring to touch those considered unclean, by daring to love those who are social outcasts, by loving and serving and giving his life for *all* people — tax collectors and sinners, the blind and the lame, the lepers and the demon-possessed, the scribes and the Pharisees, and also you and me.

This good news that Jesus brings to us stakes a claim on our lives and on our hearts. The good news is a call to follow. Following Jesus is not about separating ourselves from those considered less holy or more unclean. Following Jesus means that like him, we get our hands dirty serving others, caring especially for those whom the world has cast aside. True faithfulness is not about clean hands, but a heart cleansed and a life shaped by the radical, self-giving love of God in Christ. True internal integrity and self-realization is matching the actions we take with the words we speak which are the words we profess to believe. It is actually living the gospel we profess to believe. Such a course of action sets us apart from the culture in which we live, but it does not set us apart from our brothers and sisters. Such living creates in us a space for God and an authenticity that is unmistakable. There's no question that it's a struggle because evil lurks just a heartbeat away inside each of us and we will always be tempted to take the easy way out. That seems to be our nature. But in the midst of this struggle between living into the creation God had in mind for us and slipping back into an existence that has little or no meaning, we know that Jesus will be our champion and will never abandon or forsake us.

For that, we say, Thanks be to God.

AMEN.