

“Religious, but Not Spiritual”
Psalm 15; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
September 2, 2018

Our Old Testament Lesson today comes from the book of Psalms, chapter 15:

O Lord, who may abide in your tent?

Who may dwell on your holy hill?

Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,
and speak the truth from their heart;

who do not slander with their tongue,

and do no evil to their friends,

nor take up a reproach against their neighbors;

in whose eyes the wicked are despised,

but who honor those who fear the Lord;

who stand by their oath even to their hurt;

who do not lend money at interest,

and do not take a bribe against the innocent.

Those who do these things shall never be moved.

The Word of the Lord (Thanks be to God)

Our Gospel Lesson comes from the book of Mark, chapter 7, verses 1-8, 14-15, 21-23:

Would you please stand with me for the reading of the Gospel?

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews,

do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, 'Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?' He said to them, 'Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

"This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines."

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.'

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.' For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.'

The Gospel of our Lord (Praise be to you, O Christ).

I don't know if it happens to you when you mention to people you're a church-goer, but as a minister, when I have that awkward moment in an airplane or on a park bench when someone asks me my profession, I get a number of responses. One, I might hear: "You can do that as a woman? I thought you were Baptist!" After the initial shock wears off because I seem like such a "normal" person and because not all Baptists fit one stereotype, I will usually then get a litany of

reasons the person does or does not attend church, when they last attended church, and how some church in the past was good, bad, or ugly in some way to them. So you can see why sometimes I tell people I direct a nonprofit aimed to care for the poor – just a simpler conversation!

But really - Most of the time, I am honest and let folks give me their reasons for being lapsed churchgoers, most of which come with something related to Christian hypocrisy or a group of mean Christians that hurt them in the past. It grieves me how often I hear this. And they typically follow it up with – “But I’m very spiritual and I believe in God!”

“Spiritual but not religious” can often be a go-to answer for those who choose not to attend religious gatherings. But I think as often as I hear that – and complaints about people who choose that path from churchgoers, I hardly ever hear us talk about the religious who aren’t spiritual. Yet, here in the book of Mark, that’s precisely what Jesus is calling out: here are the most religious folks around, those seeking after God with all aspects of their lives. Those whose holiness and purity matters a great deal, and who take seriously God’s command to keep the traditions of the elders, despite being under Roman occupation when it would be easy to give in to pagan rituals and give up on God’s law. And you’ll note that Jesus doesn’t say to them: “Your handwashing rule is wrong.” In fact, he never says the traditions themselves are the problem. We humans need a sense of order, we need laws to organize our communities, and we need doctrines to help us articulate our beliefs.¹ These are not in themselves bad things. But, when we start to worship these things and bow down to them rather than God’s teachings, we cease to be faithful to what we say we believe. This is especially true when practices of ritual become a means to judge and oppress others.

¹ Feasting on the Word, Loc 888.

So, what does Jesus do when he is asked about skipping the ritual? He calls upon the tradition of the prophets and quotes Isaiah, the same prophet that called on Israel “to loose the bonds of injustice and share bread with the hungry, bringing the homeless into your house.” Jesus, knowing this own prophetic tradition, called on the religious folk of his community to remember that it is their ethics – the way they live – rather than the correct performance of any ritual act that makes them holy.

Now, before we get on our high horse against “the Pharisees,” I would ask us to take a step back. Far too often, we tend to vilify the religious folks that Jesus calls out in the Gospels. We think – “here’s a group of Jews who often ignored or argued with the Messiah. How dumb must they have been? I would never have done that.” And we also tend to see their clean and unclean ideas as completely outdated. “It’s been 2000 years – we aren’t dealing with that kind of thing anymore!” But I don’t think this story has completely gone stale with time, because just like the Pharisees, we are a people who commit sins by the way we choose to act religiously.

Jesus reminds them that they are worshiping God in vain when they are holding onto their own human traditions above the commandment of God to love their neighbors as themselves. So, really, the problem isn’t handwashing or traditions at all, but the lack of care given to those whom we ought to be serving. Jesus calls this a defiled heart – something that doesn’t come from outward acts, but something that comes from within.

What might that look like today? Let’s look at our own traditions – we are a people who dress up for church, come into a clean, beautiful space, and worship together. What happens if someone who is struggling with homelessness comes in with dirty fingernails and old, tattered clothing? How many of us would give up

our seats and how many would scoot away? What if someone who struggles with mental illness disrupted our service? Would we love her and embrace her or look at the floor and hope she quits while someone escorts her out? What if someone brought a very young child into worship instead of dropping them off at the nursery and the child began to cry? Would we glare at its mother for choosing differently than we would, or would we help her soothe her infant and rejoice in the noise? We seem to put our energy into keeping people out rather than inviting them in and examining where we may have let them down with our own actions and stubbornness.

Thus, I really do wonder if our traditions and rules sometimes hold us back from ministry to others. If we are so stuck to perfectly ordered lives, we are likely to miss out on the opportunity to do the messy work of relationship building with people who are different from us. And Jesus seems to think that's exactly what we'll do. Just like if the Pharisees keep focusing on their handwashing to the detriment of those who would come to fellowship at a meal with them in the temple, they are missing the point of being holy. So too are we missing out on a loving ministry when we focus on the imperfections and differences of others.

So, what does holiness look like? The disciples, as usual, wanted an explanation of what Jesus really meant when he said what he did about defilement from within. Jesus gives a pretty succinct answer: It isn't the cleanliness of food or hands that matters here; it is the thoughts and actions of those who would welcome or turn away others that defiles. And then he gives the disciples a list of some of the evils that can come from a person's heart. Most of these we are aware of – they echo the Ten Commandments and Jesus's other teachings. We may not use the words avarice or licentiousness much, but in our churches we are always dealing with greed and lack of sexual restraint – recent revelations about clergy abuse remind us of this every day in the news cycle. We also may not have a plethora of

murderers, but we have white-collar criminals who steal and we have marriages falling apart due to adultery and selfishness. We are all susceptible to these defilements Jesus speaks of. These evils are not from messing up rule-following; they come from within us and they must be confronted as such.

Jesus says it's not our traditions that will save us. It is our attention to what is in our hearts that will show who we have been transformed into as we journey with Christ.

So - what's important is not that we act perfectly and come to church every Sunday and serve on several committees (though all of these are important and meaningful to serving God), but they will all mean very little if we are not also examining our hearts in the process. Are we being honest in our marriages and relationships? Are we providing for others without expecting anything in return? Are we focused on being caring and kind? Are we remembering that we might not know everything – and might even just be wrong? These are the kinds of questions we should be asking if we want to avoid defilement – and not asking whether everyone around us is as proper as us or holds to our traditions just so.

So, what can we do to make sure we stay on guard against defilement of our hearts? How do we develop into people who are not just religious, but are spiritually aware and ready always to listen to the voice of God, who asks us to be people of holiness from within?

I think it begins with the recognition that we need to work at our spiritual lives.

We have to remember that as a faith community we can't always just trust that our way of doing religion will last forever. God has infused spirits around the globe in many ways, changing hearts and communities and yet living vibrantly in their cultures. If we see that culture around us has changed, perhaps God is already

out there and the Spirit is at work. And if we're in here doing the same old thing every week, we might just miss an opportunity.

And I think personally we can seek out religious practices that help remind us daily how to be more like the kind of person Jesus would want us to be. Jesus doesn't hate religious people; Jesus just wants religious people to be more like God through their practices – accepting, loving, open, and ready to serve. If we're so busy judging other people's choices that we can't find the time to serve them, we are going to miss out.

In the long history of Christianity, we have been given gifts from those who have come before us and have taken the time to develop spiritual practices to help Christians find ways to live better in this world. One of my favorites has always been St. Ignatius of Loyola. His spiritual discipline of discernment is one way we can begin to examine our hearts carefully as we go about our days. From making decisions to simply living into a path of righteousness, he said one of the first steps is to detach yourself from your own opinions and rules and spend time listening for the voice of God. Doing this will help us to discern between good and evil in our lives. And doing this practice requires an openness to prayer – not just speaking our desires in prayer, but encountering God's heart for us as we pray. Only through ongoing attention to God's guiding presence in the ordinary stuff of life can we become so fully aware in each moment that our prayers bring into focus who we are and what we need to be about.

There are so many different kinds of spiritual practices we can employ to help us find a centering place to focus more on God and God's will than on our own wills and traditions that might hinder our ability to love God and neighbor in the way Jesus calls us to do. Perhaps you've always done a morning devotion, but you've found your prayer time to be mostly a litany of requests without much listening.

Maybe contemplative prayer could help move you to a deeper level of meaning as you reach out to God each day. Or perhaps you've read the Bible most every day, but you end up reading it either mostly at face value without much study, or far too deeply critical, without much Spirit. Maybe the spiritual practice of *lectio divina*, or praying the Scriptures, might open new avenues of understanding God's meaning for your life. Maybe practices of Sabbath keeping, charitable giving, service work, hospitality, and forgiveness could provide new ways to experience God's love as you share your journey with others.

Whatever practices we pursue, however, the goal Jesus gives us here is to continually reevaluate their effectiveness over against the welcoming love of Christ. Is what we're doing bringing us closer to God's unconditional love for this world, or is it keeping us – and our neighbors – away from the kind of fellowship and kinship God is calling us to?

If we don't take the time to examine our own hearts and practices, we can easily fall prey to the very thing so many of those I meet explain to me: "the church is full of hypocrisy." And no, we can't get away from all imperfection in church – we are in fact still a group of humans imperfectly trying to live out our faith together. But we can work toward avoiding many of the pitfalls of hypocrisy by remembering that there can easily be a disconnect between the moral values we say we espouse – like loving our neighbor as ourselves – and what we practice in our behavior – like rejecting someone different from us in our worship space, or failing to serve others because they have made different decisions than we would. We can end up damaging the credibility of Jesus's message in this world, and even worse, we create idols of our traditions that lead us away from the ultimate goal of our faith: loving God with our entire being, and loving those God created as we love ourselves. But the good news is that we are a people who are always changing by God's grace and living into Christ's message.

At the Table

And so now we gather as a people changed. Working to love our neighbors equally and the way God loves them, we welcome all to this Table. This is not my table or even First Baptist Martinsville's table. This is Christ's table. If you believe that Jesus is Lord, you are welcome here at this table.

Jesus was dining with friends on the night he was betrayed, and he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks for it, he broke it and said, "This is my body broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

In the same way, he took the cup, and he said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink of it, in remembrance of me...For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

If you are looking for a place to worship together, serve together, and grow together, and you would like to make First Baptist Martinsville your spiritual family, I invite you during this final hymn to meet me at the front to join us in our journey together by profession of faith and baptism or by transfer of membership from a sister church. Come.

Benediction

May we believe as the Psalmist did, that we are a people who can dwell with God, that is, to be more like God.

May we live as God calls us to:

Walking blamelessly, doing what is right, speaking the truth, honoring others, living with integrity, and giving generously –

This day and always, as we move our hearts towards the heart of God.

[Choral Amen]