

15th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
September 2, 2018

Text: Mark 7:1-8 and 14-15 and 21-23

Theme: *Adiaphora*

In my first parish it took me less than a month to break the golden rule of ministry: Pastors are not to make any changes in their first calls for at least the first twelve months. I had no idea how difficult it would be to honor that rule because even the most innocent and (what I assumed to be inconsequential changes) caused hurt feelings.

I learned first-hand that any changes made by a new pastor indicated to the members one of two things. Either the members had done something wrong for all those years prior to my arrival or (even worse) their beloved pastor (who recently left them) taught them incorrectly. Both scenarios were not acceptable. So in that first year it was critical for me to not only learn all the nuances of these so-called traditions but I had to understand the history behind them. It indeed took me a full twelve months before I could then gently move our members to accept some of the changes that were important to me as pastor.

In religious terms the word is *adiaphora*. It is those things that we do in our churches which are neither commanded nor forbidden by God but have been introduced in the interest of good order. But hidden in this definition are deeper questions –

Why do we do the things that we do?

Are they rooted in God's intent for us or is it simply our tradition?

What really matters . . . and what does not?

One simple and innocent act that took place early in my ministry started me on a path that has since turned into a life-lesson. Before making any kind of change to something that is deemed a tradition it is wise to check in with all the people who will be affected by the new direction set before them. It is critical to have mutual conversations to name all of the benefits and concerns before heading down a new path. The whole process of instituting change becomes a teaching moment and once implemented it is important to move at a pace that allows for any differences of opinion to be honored and respected.

In the Gospel lesson for today, Jesus faced the indignation of some of the scribes and Pharisees because he allowed his disciples to ignore tradition. These religious leaders were deeply disturbed that his followers were not washing their hands properly before eating. There was no biblical law about this but there was a requirement that priests were to wash their hands and feet before they approached the altar. Over time that requirement came to include the washing of their hands before eating. And from there it was understood that all the Israelites should mirror the actions of the priests. Therefore all people should follow these same rituals.

Note that we are not talking here about biblical laws but *adiaphora*. It is those things that we do which are neither commanded nor forbidden by God but have been introduced in the interest of good order. By his actions Jesus challenged these religious leaders to think about why they do the things that they do. Are they rooted in God's intent for them? What really matters?

Every church has traditions that we have turned into law. We all have a certain way of doing things that have evolved over time. Jesus challenges us to look at the things we do and to ask ourselves: Do any of these things really matter at the end of the day? As we read the text carefully we come to understand that Jesus was not criticizing the traditions, themselves. He was making it clear that the emphasis that people placed on them was misguided. Jesus reminded the religious leaders that our traditions do not make us more or less acceptable to God. What makes us acceptable to God is how we honor God with our hearts.

Jesus goes on to offer us some clear guidance on what is truly important. It is interesting that his suggestions are relevant not only for our churches but for what takes place inside our homes as well. We are encouraged to pay less attention to our rituals and routines that we have made into law and return to the commandments given to us by God that sets the tone for our relationship with him and with our neighbors.

When our traditions stand in the way of being in the midst of the people and meeting them where they are and serving them with love instead of judgment then our piety is misguided.

God does not want his people to walk around with clean hands when there is work to be done in his kingdom. It is what we say and how we say it that matters. It is what we do and how we do it that matters. We do not have to worry so much about what goes into us but we are to be fully cognizant of what comes out of us. Our rituals may be important to us but we have to cast aside anything that distracts us or prevents us from putting God first or doing the will of God first (that we heard in our lessons last week).

The scribes and the Pharisees were too focused on the outward manifestations of their faith that they neglected to examine their own hearts. In essence their efforts to live faithful lives led them to prance around the streets of the city and point their fingers in judgment on those who did not follow their traditions – their way of doing things. Instead of expressing true piety and holiness their traditions became the means by which people were excluded. And as a result the religious leaders made others feel somehow dirty and contaminated.

We would be wise in our attempt to do things right and to have things in good order to test our own hearts so they align with the will of God. If we truly want to live in faithful obedience to God we will not stand around and judge those who do not live in the same traditions as we do. We cannot ever set ourselves above others either in this church or outside its walls. If any of our church traditions or personal habits of piety separates us from others then it is also separating us from God and we have to let those traditions go.

Mark 7 is certainly heavy on the law but there is gospel here as well. In the larger context of this chapter he shows us what true piety and holiness looks like as he dares to defy tradition and touches those considered unclean. He dares to cast aside ritual observances (not the law mind you) to love those who are social outcasts, tax collectors and sinners, lepers and those who are demon possessed, scribes and Pharisees, you and me.

The good news for today should again make us pause as we stop and consider what things we do in our worship or in our church life or in our homes that separates us from those considered less holy or even unclean. Our gospel lesson has less to do with clean hands and more to do with a clean heart and a life shaped by the radical, self-giving love of God in Christ.

We are asked to lead with that radical, self-giving love.

Everything else is adiaphora.

Why do we do the things that we do?

Is it rooted in God's intent for us or simply our tradition?