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Friday, August 27, 2021  
Year B, Proper 17

Deuteronomy 4:1-2,6-9  
James 1:17-27  
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

“Who moved my cheese?”

- Did you ever read the book called, “Who moved my cheese?”<sup>1</sup>
  - It was published in 1998 and spent five years on the New York Times business best seller
  - It sold over 26 million copies world wide, making it one of the best selling business books ever<sup>2</sup>
    - You can still buy it on Amazon and it is not one of those \$.99 books either! Full price still today
  - I am sure you are all familiar with it, so we will call this a throw back analogy! Here’s a refresher if your memory is fuzzy:
    - In it, the two main characters, Hem and Haw, are on the search for cheese, that cheese symbolizing whatever it is that one might desire
    - One day, walking through a maze, they find some cheese!
    - It is everything they wanted, and more. Plenty to last a long time, and they sit down, get comfortable, and start eating.
    - This lasts for a long time, but one day, the predictable happens
    - They go to get more cheese, and there is none. They have eaten it all, and more has not arrived.
    - They have to decide whether to stay, hoping more cheese will appear
    - Or walk into the unknown parts of the maze looking for more cheese
    - Eventually one of the two leaves in search of more cheese and finds it, but the other cannot change and stays behind.
  - There is no attempt to hide the meaning in this business parable
  - It challenges us in our tendency to get comfortable, and warns that nothing stays the same
  - Be prepared to adapt as the situation changes around us

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.amazon.com/Who-Moved-My-Cheese-Amazing/dp/0399144463>

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Who\\_Moved\\_My\\_Cheese%3F](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Who_Moved_My_Cheese%3F)

- If I were to hear a preacher begin a sermon with this story I might get a little concerned about what was going to come next
- So let me reassure you: I am not preparing you for any specific big change today
- But you all know so much has changed recently that perhaps this old business book still has some wisdom in it for us
- I want us to take a little bit to examine the theological implications of what this might hold- yes I think it is theological too
- Perhaps it can show us something about our spiritual lives.
- Maybe it can even tell us something about God.
- What got me thinking about all this cheese and change was our Gospel this morning
  - And of course the sheer amount of change that we are dealing with today, and even within St. Michael's this past year- and even several years
  - They keep saying the old normal is gone and will never return- we have to make a new normal now.
    - Find the cheese again...
  - Maybe like the Pharisees in today's Gospel
  - In the Gospel, Jesus and the Pharisees clash again and disagree over what it means to be faithful to God, and what God wants from us
  - I feel a bit of sympathy for them, really, even though the gospels often portray them as "a brood of vipers"
  - While I am sure that Jesus had conflicts and debates with the Pharisees
  - I also think that the gospels, written with the purpose of converting Jews to Christianity, have their bias <sup>3</sup>
  - Most of the Pharisees were probably trying to do what they thought God wanted- an earnest effort
  - This was the path to righteousness and purity, as they had been taught all their lives
  - They notice that Jesus' disciples are not following the laws and they are eating with defiled, or dirty, hands
  - So they ask. Perhaps they ask in a condescending way, or with the implication that Jesus is not a true Jew because of this
  - He is, after all, not following Jewish law, and certainly should not be a rabbi leading people astray
  - Jesus responds with a ruthless, yet accurate criticism of their whole understanding

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<sup>3</sup> *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Marion Soards ed., 25

- He claims that one cannot be made unclean by what goes in the mouth.
- One is unclean based on what comes out, which is a direct reflection of what the inside of the person is like.
- Actually, it's a little more clever than that in the skipped verses today
- Jesus says, when you eat something, it passes through and goes into the sewer- that is not what defiles
- What defiles you, Pharisees, is when it comes out your mouths instead... BOOM!
- 2000 year old poop joke and insult all in one! <sup>4</sup>
- In addition to being surprised and offended... I bet they felt like someone had moved their holy cheese
- In their defense, Jesus is changing the game a little here- or at least reminding them of something they had forgotten
  - For millennia, the Jews have held on to their dietary laws and customs
  - They were apart of the law of Moses, and it kept them distinct even when they were exiled in Babylon or the Roman Empire
  - Even the surrounding areas with their different religions operated in a similar way<sup>5</sup>
    - They all had a notion of purity, of clean and unclean
  - For Jesus to suggest that God does not care what you eat, it would have been very foreign to all of them
  - Jesus has challenged their entire concept of God by directly challenging their ideas surround purity and righteousness <sup>6</sup>
  - It was not that Jesus objected to washing hands and dishes, or even that he disapproved of the dietary laws per se<sup>7</sup>
  - Jesus wants them to realize that a person's interior, their intent and motive, weigh in just as much as the action itself.
  - The Pharisees have found plenty of opportunity to obey the law, but still take advantage of other people, still cause harm
  - Jesus points out that they have found loopholes to get around what they should be doing
  - They satisfy the letter of the law, but not its spirit.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper17b>

<sup>5</sup> *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Marion Soards ed., 26

<sup>6</sup> *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Marion Soards ed., 26

<sup>7</sup> Matt Skinner, [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect\\_date=9/2/2012](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=9/2/2012)

- The human precepts that have been added to God's law are held to the higher standard,
  - While what God really wanted is left undone.
- And that, Jesus says, is the hypocrisy
- I imagine God thinking: I gave this law so that you would do the right things and that hopefully it would sink into your heart
- Seems that did not work, so I'll say it another way through Jesus:
  - Defilement starts on the inside.
- And God says, I want your outside to reflect the good that is within, not just cover up the bad.
- He asks the Pharisees to get back to the heart of the law, of how God loves us, and wants us to love him, and treat other people
- Clear away the superfluous that is getting in the way and look for God within you and within the people you meet.
- I started wondering: do you think God sometimes moves the cheese on us?
  - Certainly God is there when the rug is pulled out from under us
  - I think it is possible- that maybe we too can get a little too comfortable and God wants to shake us up a bit
  - Whether God is moving and shaking in our hearts and lives, or whether we are dealing with change that no one could predict or prevent
  - Sometimes it is in those moments that there is a chance to form some new and intentional way of living
  - We have a chance to break free and go on our own little spiritual sojourn, I think
  - Maybe that's what Jesus was hoping for with the Pharisees here, after shaking it up for them.
  - When things change, we have to choose to either stay with our empty actions and ignore the emptiness inside
  - Or seek after God, walking possibly into the unknown to find new ways of being in relationship with God
- I think it is impossible to sit in any church this morning and not wonder, if only briefly, if what Jesus said to the disciples applies to you and me
  - We are the religious folks of today, like the Pharisees were then
  - Our rituals and traditions, especially in the Episcopal church, are beautiful and meaningful
    - And we have fun doing them!
    - For Episcopalians, our worship shapes our belief, our theology
  - For me, a liturgy done well can bring me to a point of prayer and worship that cannot be achieved any other way

- But if we leave having only heard, as it says in James, then we missed the point
- Or even if we do the work, follow the rules, check all the right boxes
- But go away without allowing God's love and purpose sink into our hearts, we may have missed the point.
- Instead, what God desires is a relationship with us that will then spill over into all the other things we do
- A connection with God that fills us up with love and grace, and then overflows out into all other parts of our lives
- Overflows in our interactions in checkout lines, in the traffic jams, in the restaurants
- From the prayers on the inside flow forth the rite and rituals on Sunday morning
- Connecting us to God and each other
- If you find yourself sitting in one place wondering where the cheese went, then get going
- Look for God, seek after God, talk with God, and you will find God.
- Don't remain hungry and empty
- Go back to the simple one-on-one walk with God that each of us need so that our hearts align with what we do
- Find some time to pray, even if its while in the shower or walking the dog
- Find time to seek God and to spend time in quiet prayer
- And God will find you too.
- The good news is that as we start to look for God
  - As we begin reigniting that fire within our hearts that comes from our daily walk with God
  - We know that God is also looking for us.
  - I will never forget the screensaver on our retired Bishop's laptop- it said:
  - "God is like an insomniac pacing the night sky searching for a way to reach us."
  - May God keep looking for ways to reach us.
  - May God always comfort us when our cheese disappears, and never let us get too complacent or comfortable before moving it
  - In those moments of displacement, when the world is upside down, when we are sinking in the waters of the unknown
  - God is holding out a hand for us to grab onto.

Amen.