

Sermon for 9-2-18
Gospel: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
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Last Sunday evening, I was privileged to attend Springfield's monthly ecumenical Taize prayer service at First Baptist Church, down on South Fountain Avenue. If you've been part of a Taize worship experience in the past, then you know that these services include prayer and Scripture readings, simple, repetitive songs, and lots of silence. I love the silence -- don't get me wrong! -- but I often find my attention wandering while it seems that everyone around me is deep in prayer and meditation.

Last Sunday was my first time inside the sanctuary at First Baptist, so during those moments of extended silence I admired the worship space; specifically, the many colorful fabric banners on the walls decorated with words and images from Scripture. My favorite was a large white banner with a beautiful, full bowl of fruit next to a list of attributes -- love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control -- the 'Fruits of the Spirit' from St. Paul's letter to the Galatians.

This lovely banner came to my mind again as I read the last few verses of today's reading from the Gospel of Mark. That list of "evil intentions" is quite a doozy, isn't it? "Fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly." Try saying that three times fast! It's kind of a reverse 'Fruits of the Spirit' -- the Fruits of Depravity, or Rotten Fruits -- whatever we call them, they wouldn't make a very pretty banner!

It's easy to focus on this list of sinful fruits, and be distracted from all that comes before it in the passage. After all, these words capture our attention and make us more than a little nervous. We may wonder where we fit into that list. Which of these Rotten Fruits are my greatest weaknesses? But if we want to understand what Jesus is really getting at here, we must consider the entire episode, even the verses that our lectionary omits, in order to see the full picture.

The seventh chapter of Mark begins in a moment when Jesus and his disciples are taking a brief respite from their ministry of healing -- traveling from village to village and restoring health and wholeness to those suffering from infirmities and diseases.ⁱⁱ They have stopped to share a meal together, and the Pharisees, who've come from Jerusalem to investigate this troublemaker from Nazareth, notice that some of Jesus's disciples are not adhering to the tradition of ritual hand-washing before they eat. This hand-washing is not about cleaning off germs, mind you, it's about ritual purification, a symbol of being clean before God.

So the Pharisees are excited because they've found their "Gotcha!" moment. They can use this to attack Jesus's credibility and take him down a few pegs. But the conversation doesn't go quite the way they had planned. Jesus has no time for their obsessive, showy, judgmental traditionalism. His response is to quote from the great prophet Isaiah: "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."ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus aligns himself with the great tradition of Hebrew prophets (like Isaiah, Ezekiel, Nathan, and Amos) who railed against hollow piety, that is, the selective preoccupation with certain aspects of religious observance alongside the abandonment of core moral tenets of the faith, like love for God and neighbors, justice for the oppressed, and reverence for life.

Jesus calls the Pharisees hypocrites in verse 6, but we can't really understand that label without verses 9 through 13, which are left out of our reading for today (I'm guessing because they're kind of confusing). In those missing verses, Jesus provides a concrete example of the Pharisees' hypocrisy -- the widespread practice of using *korban* offerings (offerings meant to support the work of the temple) as a way to avoid financial responsibilities in caring for one's aging parents. It's sort of like the ancient version of hiding money in a bank account in the Cayman Islands or another 'tax haven' country. Selfish people who didn't want to support their parents could declare their wealth as *korban* -- "Sorry mom and dad, I'd love to help you out, but my money's dedicated to the Temple." Jesus points out that in

supporting this practice, the Pharisees are encouraging people to disobey the commandment to "Honor thy father and thy mother."^{iv}

Jesus calls the Pharisees hypocrites because they are so concerned with ritual hand-washing while also ignoring (and even promoting) disobedience of God's commandment to honor parents. Jesus doesn't seem to care one way or the other whether his disciples are following the traditions of ritual purity; but he cares deeply whether or not they follow the core principles of God's law as found in the Ten Commandments and the wisdom of the prophets ("...what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"^v).

In verses 14 and 15, Jesus calls the crowds closer to listen as he emphasizes his feelings about the necessity of ritual purity: "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." Jesus doesn't say that practicing ritual hand-washing is bad or sinful; he simply says that it's not worth worrying about.

The purity Jesus cares about is purity of the heart, and it isn't maintained or defined by repeated rituals or adherence to particular rules but by what we put out into the world, our words and actions and choices. Jesus wants us to search our hearts and ensure that our behavior, our way of life, is in harmony with the essential values of our faith. The Pharisees' version of practicing faith is **not** what Jesus asks for -- obsessively trying to 'catch' other people in sin, judging and condemning anyone with a different understanding, showing no trace of love or kindness or humility.

We have plenty of Christian Pharisees today. They're the ones who picket at soldiers' funerals and scream at children outside schools. The ones who seem incapable of showing any emotion other than anger, disgust, or hatred. Sometimes they show up outside our Diocesan Cathedral in Cincinnati to harass the clergy and worshippers there. They carry signs with hateful messages, shake their clenched fists, and shout about those who are damned to eternal hellfire (which is anyone and everyone whose

understanding of the Christian faith is different from their own). They pull out a single Bible verse -- usually one about sexuality from Leviticus, or women preachers from 1 Timothy -- and use it to attack, demean, and degrade specific children of God. There's no evidence of love, or justice, or kindness, or humility in their words and actions; just obsessive, self-righteous judgment and hollow piety.

How would Jesus respond to today's Pharisees? If his response to the Pharisees of his day is any indication, then perhaps he would challenge them to refocus their energies on the true essence of faith, the priorities of the Gospel -- unselfish love of God and neighbor, compassion and mercy and justice and peace. And perhaps he would call us to him, and give us all the same reminder he gave his crowds of followers back then: that his ultimate concern for us is not satisfied by obsessive adherence to historic traditions of purity and Scriptural one-upmanship; but by speaking and acting and living in harmony with the values of his Gospel. Purity of heart is what he desires.

This is truly Good News for us all: however others may judge us, whether they sneer and declare us impure or unfit, Jesus tells us the truth -- it's our words and actions that demonstrate the purity of our hearts and the shape of our souls. Jesus asks us to continually search our hearts and walk in God's love with all that we do; nothing more, and nothing less. **That's** the religion he seeks. Thanks be to God! Amen.

ⁱ Mark 7:21-22 NRSV

ⁱⁱ see Mark 6:53-56

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark 7:6-7

^{iv} Exodus 20:12, Deuteronomy 5:16

^v Micah 6:8