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

7:1 Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, 2 they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. 3 (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; 4 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.) 5 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?" 6 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; 7 in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' 8 You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." 14 Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: 15 there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." 21 For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, 22 adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. 23 All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

Second-Guessing God

I believe it was four years ago, when I was youth pastor for a church in Long Island that had a very large, very active youth group, that our youth group put on a Christmas Pageant for the adults. The teens were very creative and enthusiastic. They wrote their own skit, a play in three parts about a father who is going through such hard times that he robs a store at gunpoint in order to feed his family. It was a powerful and moving play with a happy ending, as the father comes to know Christ and is able to return to his family and celebrate a very joyous Christmas. I was so proud of the teens who worked so hard on this skit.

But not everyone was moved in a positive way by the skit. One of the adults who saw the play was very upset that the teens had brought a gun, albeit a toy gun, into the sanctuary, and that person scolded the president of the youth group, who was left bewildered and crying. How could she know about such a tradition that was so important to this man? What had she done wrong?

Now what about this man who scolded our youth group president? Was he at fault? Shouldn’t he defend the sanctity of the sanctuary? Should he be commended for enforcing a tradition that he considered so important?

We must be careful not to see this as a black-and-white issue. There is value in tradition, and keeping traditions is important for people to maintain their own identity and sense of community. We have many traditions in the church. Furthermore, there are people who have complete disregard for traditions and even for laws. I remember my freshman year of college, in my dormitory, sitting around and talking with a bunch of friends, and the conversation drifted to religion. One of my friends made the comment, “You know, you Christians think it’s so easy. You go out and sin, then you go to church, get forgiven and start all over again.” I don’t remember how the Christians in the room responded to him; I don’t know if I considered myself a Christian at that time; like so many of my peers I had stopped going to church even though I was “confirmed” in the Church. My friend saw Christians as nearly pagan, living a life of revelry and gluttony throughout the week only to be magically cleansed almost at will. “God forgives” seemed to be the refrain offered by most Christians when confronted with their vices. But if you are sincere in your plea for forgiveness, why do you keep repeating the sin? While I don’t believe that our youth group president who was scolded for breaking the tradition of her elders was at all culpable, I do believe that there are many “carwash Christians” who callously disregard others’ feelings and values and customs because “God forgives.” But sin is nothing to be frivolous about. We should not take God’s grace so lightly.

But just as dangerous as paying too little attention to things that are important to God is paying too much attention to things that are not so important to God. Do we start burning the paintings of artists because they depict human nudity? Do we burn books that are too “humanistic”? How many religious utopian societies have stifled artistic expression and creativity, repressed people because of their belief or their race or their gender too often in the name of God?

This sin is what I would like to examine this morning, a sin that seems to result from good intentions gone awry. In today’s reading, Jesus is confronted by the scribes and Pharisees because some of his disciples have disregarded some of the traditions of the elders. Jesus rebukes the scribes and Pharisees, calling them hypocrites and telling them that they worship God with their lips while their hearts remain far from him. Then he goes on to tell the crowd that it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles, but what comes out of the mouth, what comes from the heart. When we rely strictly on laws and rules to guide our lives, we very quickly run into a problem; there aren’t enough laws and rules written in this world to guide us in every situation. Life is too complicated – there are too many variables. To try to please God by following a complex code of laws and traditions is to impose slavery upon ourselves. Jesus says, “The Law was made for man, not man for the Law.”[[1]](#footnote-1) God’s intention in giving us the Law was help us live peacefully in community; he was not trying to complicate our life but rather he wanted to simplify it.

And the law was never intended to be a substitute for God. So many religious zealots try to please God by studying his law rather than building a relationship. They approach God like a scientist approaches an organism, trying to figure out what will keep God satisfied. Why? Perhaps out of fear. The less we do to disturb God, the safer we are! People who approach God in this manner have no interest in building anything more than a functional relationship with God; If we do *x*, God will do *y.* And Jesus rightly assesses that their hearts are far away from God.

When a husband buys flowers for his wife, does he buy them expecting that his wife will respond in some predictable way, so that he may somehow control his wife based on the frequency with which he presents her with flowers? Is how a relationship works? Not at all! A husband buys his wife flowers because something in his heart prompted him to do something that simply expresses love. He may buy flowers because his wife is feeling sad. He may buy them because he has seen something that reminds him of her kindness. Whatever the specific reason, at the root is his love for his wife.

And if a husband ever lies to his wife, cheats on her, speaks rudely to her, steals from her, the relationship suffers. He has *defiled* the relationship with his wife. Thus Jesus says that is what comes out of our hearts that defiles us.

There’s no need to second-guess God. We don’t need to study him the way we would study a frog in biology class. God is a living, loving being who calls us into relationship, and a relationship is from the heart. God’s laws are perfect, but they were not meant to paralyze us or to complicate our life. I pray that you would nurture your relationship with God so that your heart would be with his heart, that you would walk with sure steps, that your life would be lead by the Holy Spirit, and that your love for God would grow to equal his love for you.

1. citation [↑](#footnote-ref-1)