

## PROPER SEVENTEEN, PENTECOST 14, YEAR B, AUGUST 29, 2021

A mother asked her son to wash his hands before eating and her son responded, "Jesus said it's okay to eat without washing your hands!" The mother looked at her son and asked, "Where did you hear such a thing?" "Oh, it's in the Bible" he said. "The Pharisees were big tattletales and told Jesus the disciples were eating without washing their hands and Jesus told them they were a bunch of hypocrites."

The mother asked, "Well, did Jesus tell his disciples they didn't have to wash their hands?" "I don't know," the boy replied, "But he didn't make them either -- and if it's good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for me!"

You and I know that Jesus was not advocating eating with dirty hands in our gospel reading for today. The lesson is not really about hand washing at all -- it is about the laws that Judaism had wrapped itself in. To our contemporary ears, the accusation might sound trivial. But the Pharisees really asked an important question, a question that gets to the heart of what authentic religion is. Consider their situation for a moment. They were first century Jewish people who were an oppressed minority, living in an occupied land. How were they to keep their faith viable against the backdrop of the plurality of the Roman Empire? How could they maintain their identity, their integrity, their heritage in the midst of religious and cultural diversity?

The Pharisees' solution to the problem was to contain and categorize the sacred. How can God's people best practice their religion among the surrounding pagans? They can create and maintain a purity culture — a culture that clearly delineates who is "in" and who is "out," who is clean and who is unclean, who deserves God's favor and who doesn't. They can practice the ancient rituals of their elders down to the last letter, as if tradition itself is the gateway to holiness. They can refuse table fellowship with the "unwashed", the tax collectors, sex workers, and other morally compromised sinners. They can set themselves apart as God's righteous and holy people.

Well truth be told this is religion as fence-building, as separation and as an institution for institution's sake. And Jesus — never one to mince words — calls it what it is. Quoting Isaiah, he rebukes the Pharisees, saying, "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."

Consider how we all draw lines in the sand to hold onto whatever we deem is sacred. Do you recall a Dr. Seuss book titled, "The Butter Battle Book?" It's a perfect example of this. It begins like this:

"On the last day of summer, ten hours before fall... my grandfather took me out to the Wall. For a while he stood silent. Then finally he said, with a very bad shake of his very old head, "As you know, on this side of the Wall we are Yooks. On the far other side of this Wall live the Zooks." Then my grandfather said, "It's high time that you knew of the terribly horrible thing that Zooks do. In every Zook house and in every Zook town every Zook eats his bread with the butter side down!" "But we Yooks, as you know, when we breakfast or sup, spread our bread," Grandpa said, "with the butter side up. That's the right, honest way!" Grandpa gritted his teeth. "So you can't trust a Zook who spreads bread underneath!"

Even though this book is a satire on the way people fight and hate one another over the smallest of traditions we know how true to life it really is. In the case of the Zooks and the Yooks it was all a matter of which tradition they grew up with.

When we talk of tradition, most of us who have seen the movie "Fiddler On The Roof" cannot help but remember the wonderful scene in which Tevya sings the theme song, "Tradition." As he sings that song, he explains to the audience the value of tradition as he sees it. At one point he says, "Our tradition tells us who God is and who we are." When tradition can do that, it is a good tradition because tradition is meant to speak of the reality behind the tradition. But when tradition becomes the focal point and more important than the reason for it, it no longer serves as a reasonable tradition.

The tragedy that Jesus was pointing out to the Pharisees that occurred with this strict adherence was that it had developed a system of rules, regulations and traditions that no longer represented the heart of God. To some degree they were trying to become more religious than God. Now this isn't just a Pharisee problem the world wide church has done the same thing. Every denomination has rules and regulations up the ying yang about every minute issue imaginable that has nothing to do with the heart of God.

Don't we sometimes behave as if we're finished products, with nothing new to discover about the Holy Spirit's movements in the world? Don't we cling to traditions and practices that long ago ceased to be life-giving, simply because we can't bear to change "the way we've always done things?" Don't we set up religious litmus tests for each other, and decide who's in and who's out based on conditions that have nothing to do with Jesus's open-hearted love and hospitality? Don't we fixate on the forms of piety we can put on display for others to applaud, instead of cultivating the secret and hidden life of God deep within our souls?

Don't we allow our cherished rituals to petrify, not noticing that our hearts, too, are becoming rigid and fixed, complacent and cold? As we engage in the business of church-hopping, churchgoing, and church-building, don't we sometimes forget that true religion is inclusive and welcoming, open-handed and open-hearted? Don't we skirt around the basic truth that authentic religion is all about love of God and love of neighbor?

It doesn't matter what specific forms our legalism takes. In some churches, it centers around liturgy or preaching styles. In others, it comes down to deifying one genre of music over another. In some faith communities, the lines in the sand have to do with women clergy, or gay marriage, or racial justice, or economic equality. The guises vary, but in the end, legalism in any guise deadens us towards God and towards our neighbors. It freezes us in time, making us irrelevant to the generations that come after us. It makes us stingy and small-minded, cowardly and anxious. It strips away our joy and robs us of peace. It causes us, in Jesus's chilling words, to "honor God with our lips" but to "worship him in vain."

So what can we do? How can we discern whether our way of doing religion is life-giving or not? Jesus gives his listeners this advice: notice what comes out of you. Notice what fruit your adherence to tradition bears. Does your version of holiness lead to hospitality? To inclusion? To freedom? Does it cause your heart to open wide with compassion? Does it lead other people to feel loved and welcomed at God's table? Does it make you brave, creative, and joyful? Does it prepare your mind and body for a God who is always doing something fresh and new? Does it facilitate another step forward in

your spiritual evolution? Or does it make you small, stingy, bored, fearful, suspicious, withholding, and judgmental?

Like everything else Jesus offers us, his confrontation with the Pharisees is an invitation. It's an invitation to consider what is really sacred and inviolable in our spiritual lives. It's an invitation to go deeper — past lip service, past tradition, past purity, past piety tests. It's an invitation to practice what this week's epistle calls "pure religion." A religion of love for the widow, the orphan, the immigrant, the stranger, the outcast, and the enemy. A religion of trust in a surprising, innovating, and ever-creating God. The God of heritage and history but also the God of an ever-living, ever-changing now.

I think that when we find that our concern is for others in true love and compassion we do not just honor Christ's way of life and love with our lips but it becomes a matter of the heart. It is a lifelong process of becoming who we're meant to be as human beings. It reflects the quality of our life. It is what in fact makes our lives meaningful.

So in the words of the Rev. Howard Anderson:

May God bless us with discomfort at easy answers, half truths, superficial relationships, so that we will live deep within our heart.

May God bless us with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people so that we will work for justice, equality, and peace.

May God bless us with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejections, starvation, and war, so that we will reach out our hand to comfort them and change their pain into joy.

And, may God bless us with the foolishness to think that we can make a difference in the world, so that we will do the things which others tell us cannot be done. Amen.