

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9; Mark 7:1-8, 14-25, 21-23
15th Sunday after Pentecost; September 2, 2018
Caroline M. Kelly

After three weeks, we've finished our exploration of the section of John's gospel where Jesus calls himself the Bread of Life. Today, we return to the Gospel of Mark where we find ourselves right back into another controversy where Jesus and the religious leadership find themselves at odds.

From Mark's gospel, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the church.

[read text]

I know when my car starts to drift to one side or the steering wheel vibrates excessively, it's probably time to get the wheels realigned. Sometimes, it takes me a while to figure this out, but boy can I feel the difference when the wheels are aligned properly. It's like a whole new ride.

I've experienced that same feeling in my own life every once in a while. When I start veering off the deep end, then I know I need a realignment. There was a time when I was so out of whack I thought the pain in my back would kill me – I was going in one direction and the Holy Spirit was pulling me in another.

Looking back at that time, I remember telling my pastor that the person I was projecting on the outside was simply not lining up with the person I knew myself to be on the inside. She described the feeling like wearing my shoes on the wrong feet. For some shoes that works okay for a while. But when you discover they're backwards and put them on the right feet, you realize how much better it feels, how right it feels. There's a sense of integrity, of wholeness, that's missing when what you are projecting to the rest of the world is different from what you feel or know on the inside.

As I listened to the tributes for John McCain at his funeral yesterday, the message that kept coming through loud and clear was the integrity with which he lived his life -- the values he championed were the same values he sought to live out through his public service – both as a Navy pilot and as a US Senator.

His colleagues didn't always agree with his decisions but they always knew where he was coming from. He didn't change his values to accommodate others or the changing culture of politics, they testified. Instead, he was guided by a sense of integrity that did not shift for reasons of political expediency. If his opinion or behavior did change, it was because he had veered from his core values and needed a realignment, if you will, to get him back on track. He'd admit his mistakes and ask for forgiveness.

This sense of integrity is exactly what Jesus is trying to impress upon the religious leaders in today's reading. And though his claim that they had abandoned the commandment of God for human tradition might have seemed revolutionary at the time, in every age since, the church has sought to keep its practices in alignment with the word of God.

Sometimes, a realignment takes place as a result of the exposure of unfaithful behavior, as it did with the abuses of the church outlined by Martin Luther in the 1500's. Sometimes changes came about as a result of thoughtful self-reflection and discernment.

At its retreat next month, the session will be introduced to a new tool for assessing our ministries and determining if they are in alignment with God's will for us. In a constantly changing context, we need to be continually measuring what we are doing according to what God is calling us to be and do. Part of this work involves discerning the difference between human tradition and God's commandments.

That's what Jesus is focused on in today's reading. He is accusing the religious leaders of elevating their oral tradition above the commandments of God. The practical effect was to exclude certain "unclean" people from table fellowship; in this case, his disciples.

Though they never said it, you can imagine them arguing, "We've always done it this way," as they defended the purity code's handwashing rule. We have to be careful when we use those words ourselves, because it may mean we need to take a good hard look at what we're doing. It may be that we've always done something the same way, but as with every tradition, it may have gotten out of alignment over time.

You can take almost any practice or custom, like Wednesday night supper and Bible study or age-based Sunday school classes or the arrangement of worship space, or when or what you use to decorate the sanctuary for Christmas, and over time change it from a habit or a custom into a law itself.

Jesus is harsh in his criticism of the Pharisees and their adherence to their tradition. But he doesn't suggest they throw out the purity code which they espoused; only that they consider whether their practice of it is aligned with the commandments of God.

For Jesus, the heart of God's commandments is the call for us to love the Lord our God and our neighbor as ourselves. He clearly affirms that the Gospel does not exist for the sake of preserving tradition. Rather, it exists for the sake of calling people into relationship with God even if it must be *in spite of* tradition. And the trick is knowing what really matters.

One pastor describes an experience that helped her "began to discern what mattered and what didn't in ministry."

She writes:

I was a young pastor serving a small, rural church.... When I began my ministry there I quickly learned it was their practice to simply come forward for communion in a line, to stand before the pastor who gave them the bread and the council member who held the chalice of wine, to receive the sacrament, dipping the wafer into the wine and then move on, making room for the next one in line. This is fairly common practice today. In the late 1980's, in my experience, not so much.

It never occurred to me then to even ask why they did this. And so it was that when our first Lent together rolled around I thought to suggest another way...that for the season leading up to Holy Week and Easter perhaps we could celebrate the sacrament instead by kneeling at the altar and receiving it by 'table.' Lent, after all, is a season of penitence, and kneeling would seem especially appropriate then.

And so on the first Sunday in Lent we knelt for communion. I'll never forget that morning as the good people of St. Paul Lutheran Church did as their pastor asked. Winifred, the matriarch of the congregation, sat on the right side near the back. She was a round faced woman whose wrinkles had been etched from years of smiling. Indeed, she was not young and her knees were not what they used to be.

After most of the rest of the congregation had come forward, Winifred made her way to the front as well and knelt with all the rest. I remember wincing to watch as she struggled to get up again. And it hit me that this was why the people of St. Paul Lutheran Church did not kneel to receive the sacrament. They did not do so out of kindness. If Winifred could not kneel, then no one would. The next week we quietly returned to standing as the bread and wine were shared.

This week's Gospel asks us, "Why do we do what we do?" "Is it rooted in God's intent for us or is it simply our 'human traditions' which guide and inform us?" "What matters and what doesn't?"¹

What matters in this debate about whether you wash your hands, according to Jesus, is not whether you are keeping the tradition perfectly but whether your heart is in the right place. What matters is whether your love for this particular tradition helps you live a life shaped according to what matters to God.

¹¹ Janet Hunt, "What Matters and What Doesn't," August 6, 2012; <http://dancingwiththeword.com/wp/what-matters-and-what-doesnt>.

The problem with the Pharisees and scribes, according to Jesus, was that they had become so focused on the externals of faithfulness that they neglected to examine their own hearts. Their efforts to live faithfully were putting up walls of alienation instead of drawing them closer to God and to their neighbors. The rituals they observed created a spiritual hierarchy between the “clean” and the “unclean.” Instead of expressing the holiness of God, ritual purity became a means of excluding people considered dirty or contaminated.

On preacher observes this about the text.

This isn't about hand washing. It never was. Just like *Masterpiece Cakeshop v Colorado Civil Rights Commission* was never about a cake. Jesus is talking about the human heart. Where is *your heart*?

As humans, we need the Pharisees—or people like the Pharisees—to give us guidelines, patterns to follow. We *want* the Pharisees to tell us how to live a virtuous life.

But just as surely as we need and want this assurance, Jesus warns that our human desire to check off a list of virtues, good deeds, and right actions, is already missing the mark.

Do you serve at a soup kitchen because it seems like the “right” thing to do? Or do you serve with the honest desire to connect with and show care for other human beings?

Do you read the Bible because that's what you're supposed to do? Or do you read out of an honest and insatiable desire to encounter God?

Do you bake cake (or refuse to bake a cake) to make a political statement? Or do you do so in order to connect with the lives of the people requesting your service?²

For many years, the Presbyterian church put a fence around the communion table, restricting participation in the sacred meal to those who were baptized and confirmed. In the late 20th century, the church examined its heart, found this practice out of alignment, and eliminated the requirement that you had to be confirmed first, so long as the participant was given instructions about communion that were appropriate for their age.

² <https://politicaltheology.com/its-not-about-the-cake-mark-71-8-14-15-21-23/>

Two years ago, the church again examined its heart on this matter again and decided that no one should be excluded from the table. The new Directory for worship puts it this way:

The opportunity to eat and drink with Christ is not a right bestowed upon the worthy, but a privilege given to the undeserving who come in faith, repentance, and love. All who come to the table are offered the bread and cup, regardless of their age or understanding. If some of those who come have not yet been baptized, an invitation to baptismal preparation and Baptism should be graciously extended.³

So, come, all of you, eat and drink. Come to be fed for the journey. Come to be realigned with God's intention for you – for all of us – where everyone is welcome at the table of Christ.

³ W-3.0409: Theology of the Lord's Supper, *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA), Part II, Book of Order*, (Louisville, Ky: The Office of the Office of the General Assembly), 2017-19.