

Wesley United Methodist Church      Rev. Beverly E Stenmark  
September 2, 2018

Title: On the Mend: Healing Intentions

Scripture: James 1:17-27

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

A million years ago, when I was in seminary, I attended a church conference at the church where I was doing my internship. The meeting had mostly been without incident, although we all knew that there were some issues below the surface that weren't being discussed. When we came to the item on the agenda about purchasing new hymnals, the person who was leading the meeting said, "Now we come to the really sticky question that can split a church. Will your new hymnals be red or black?"

Everyone laughed but there was a truth behind his statement. In his gentle way, he was acknowledging that often the things that people tend to argue about are not the real issue. They are a surface issue, something safe to focus on, to avoid dealing with the real issue. Frequently we are not even aware that we are doing this and may not even know what the real issues are.

This was the case in today's gospel reading. The Pharisees and scribes, who prided themselves on being religious and following all the rules point out to Jesus that some of his disciples have failed to follow one of the purity laws and ritually washing before eating. Let's not get side tracked by the health benefits of washing your hands before eating because that is not what this is really about.

Part of the key is found in their slightly deeper question, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" Living according to the tradition of the elders was the concern as they understood it.

The “tradition of the elders” was an oral interpretation of Israel’s customs. The Pharisees considered this “tradition” to be legally binding on all Jews, even though not everyone followed the tradition.

Perhaps you have heard the story of the young wife who was preparing a pot roast for dinner. She carefully cut a piece off both ends of the roast before placing it in the pan. Her husband asked why she did that. “That’s what my mother always did,” she replied. “But why?”, he asked. She thought about it for a second, and said, “I don’t know. I’ll ask her.”

She called her mother to ask about the purpose of cutting the ends off the roast. Her mother’s response was, “I don’t know, that’s what my mother always did.” Determined to find out the wisdom behind cutting the ends off the roast, the young woman called her grandmother.

“Grandma, Mom says you always cut the ends off the roast before you put it in the pan, so that’s what she did and that’s what she taught me. But, why was it important to do that? Did it make the roast more tender, or juicy, or what?”

Grandma started to laugh. “No. I cut the end off the roast to make it fit inside my pan.” Sometimes we continue with traditions without knowing why we are doing something, what the purpose is, what we are hoping to accomplish by following the tradition.

Several years ago, I attended a workshop led by a man named Paul Nixon, the author of “I Refuse to Lead a Dying Church”. He told about a church in Washington DC that had a very large population of young adults, but these young adults did not attend Sunday morning worship.

We all know that Sunday morning worship is an important tradition in the Christian Church. So, how could it be that this very active congregation

that reached hundreds of young adults did not have any of them in worship on Sunday morning? He asked what the purpose of Sunday morning worship was and, of course, several replied that it was a time to worship God. He then explained the weekly life cycle of young adults in the Washington area.

Most of them left the city on the weekends, returning home to friends or family. The few who stayed in town generally spent Friday and Saturday nights socializing and very simply were not willing to get up early on a Sunday morning. So, their week looked like this. Thursday night was packing and getting ready for the weekend. Friday and Saturday they were either out of town or out socializing. Sunday they were returning to town and getting ready for the work week. Monday they were recovering from the weekend and settling in for the week. So, Tuesday and Wednesday nights were the only times when they could attract young adults. On Tuesday nights hundreds of young adults gathered to worship God.

The important thing was providing a time for these young adults to worship God and that took into account their busy lives. Sunday morning didn't work but Tuesday night was ideal. This was a case of allowing tradition to evolve to fulfill the higher purpose of worshipping God.

Jesus challenged the Pharisees and their concern for the tradition of the elders. Essentially, he accused them of being more concerned about human traditions than about what God wanted. He was challenging them to make a distinction between being "religious" and being people of faith.

In all fairness to the Pharisees, however, it is not always easy for us to really know the difference between what is God's commandment and what is human tradition. Our religious traditions come out of a particular sociocultural context and so it are mediated and understood through

human language and experience. We need tradition. We need a sense of order to feel secure. We need laws to organize our communities. We need doctrines to help us articulate our beliefs. But the challenge is to be sure that the traditions and rules do not become more important than God. When we begin to worship what gives us a sense of order, or bow down to a doctrine, then we cease to be faithful to the One who created us.

For the Jews, some of the practices of ritual cleanness were a valid concern about staying healthy, but in practice they could also become a means of judgment and oppression.

Jesus challenges the understanding of the Pharisees. He says that they are honoring God with their lips – by following the rituals and rules – but that, in reality, they are not honoring God with their hearts, with their very being. He offers a corrective teaching and explains that what goes into a person is not what makes the person unclean but rather it is what comes out of person that matters more.

Out of our heart, out of our understanding of God, out of internalizing God's desires, come our attitudes and actions that really make a difference. Is our intention to be a rule follower, or a God follower? In the sections of today's gospel that are not included in our reading for today, Jesus gives examples of ways that the Pharisees have twisted the rules so that they can claim to be following God but are acting in ways that directly contradict the Ten Commandments and God's basic rules.

We cannot attend worship, tithe, teach Sunday School, follow all the outward trappings of being Christian and then go out and murder, oppress people, steal, cheat, lie, slander, and otherwise treat people in evil ways and still claim that we are Christians just because we went to church on Sunday.

James, whom we believe to be one of Jesus' brothers, expands on what Jesus is telling people here. James gets very practical in telling his readers that we are to be doers of the word, not only hearers of the word. We are to live as persons of faith, not just as people who claim to practice a religion. The Christian faith is about love – not legalism. Jesus and James make it clear that it is the attitude with which we approach one another and the world – pride or love, judgment or mercy, exclusion or acceptance – it is these attitudes that betray our true hearts. We can either be devoted to our own egos and self-promotion, or to the gospel of Jesus Christ. For Christians, these attitudes are mutually exclusive, and discipleship means choosing one over the other.<sup>i</sup>

James says that true religion is “to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” In Jesus' patriarchal culture, the most vulnerable people were orphans and widows. In today's culture, we need to ask, who the most vulnerable are. Who are those persons we are supposed to be caring for?

We are to avoid the narcissistic temptation toward mirror-gazing and instead adopt a religious life with a fixed focus on caring for others. If we are to truly live our faith, we must learn to discern the purity of our actions and ensure that they are always meant to glorify God and not to protect our own egos or preserve our own power.<sup>ii</sup>

This is not easy to do, because we, humans, are masters of twisting things so that they come out the way we want them to, so that we look good to ourselves. We convince ourselves that our intentions are good because, of course, we are good people. This means that it can be very important to have people around us who we trust to speak the truth to us in love. It is important that we have people who can lovingly ask us about our

motives and about what we are doing and why. When we have trusted people who sincerely seek to live out their faith walking with us on our faith journey they can help us pay attention to our intentions, to our motives, to the things that come out of us.

In Mark's gospel, the people are performing their religious duties properly, but their hearts are no closer to God for following the rules of tradition. They have forgotten God's commandments from which the traditions arose. A right relationship with God comes not through religious rituals or traditions but through a heart set on God and on relationships with others.

We are challenged to examine our own lives; to look at those places in our lives where we are focused on following traditions and rules rather than on seeking to understand why we do what we do. We are challenged to identify those places where we are focused more on ourselves and less on doing things that bring glory to God. We are challenged to be "doers of the word" and not only "hearers of the word"; to put our faith into action. We are challenged to focus on our intentions, on the things that come out of us, and that really do speak volumes about who we are, who and what we value in life. May we seek to be truly open to God as we honestly and faithfully seek to live our lives as people of faith.

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<sup>i</sup> Bruzzese, Michaela. "Worthless Religion" in Preaching the Word, Sojourners.

<sup>ii</sup> Bruzzese, "Speaking Louder than Words" in Preaching the Word, Sojourners