

September 2, 2018

Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15

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“The Tradition of the Elders”

There’s a story I’ve loved telling through the years and it’s borrowed from a renowned United Methodist preacher, The Rev. Dr. Zan Holmes. Some will remember Dr. Holmes as the video host of the first edition of the Disciple Bible Study series over 30 years ago. Dr. Holmes is well into retirement these days but still on the preaching trail and still telling great stories like this one. He remembers a time he went to a dinner party at his sister’s home. Before dinner, Dr. Holmes stepped into the guest bathroom to wash his hands, partly but not fully pulling the door behind him. As he finished and with hands dripping wet he reached for the towel hanging next to the sink. That’s when he heard his sister’s voice saying loudly from the hall, “Don’t touch that towel! You’re not suppose to use that one. That’s a show towel.” “A show towel?” Dr. Holmes questioned. “Yeah, you know,” said his sister. “A show towel. You’re not supposed to use it. That towel hangs there just to make the bathroom look pretty.” From there Dr. Holmes cautions that we should be wary of becoming what he calls “Show Christians,” just hanging around the faith to make the church look pretty. Well, we’re challenged by that, aren’t we? Maybe even convicted by it; “Show Christians,” not really expecting to be used by God, not really intending to make the connection between our lives and the mission of Christ in the world. We’re just hanging around. I remember this story from Zan Holmes because of the way it encourages us to test the motivation of what we do and what we say. You see, the gospel isn’t much interested in the show. Instead, the gospel moves us beneath the surface to a deeper place. That deep place is at our center, our heart, our soul. It’s there, in our hearts, where our commitment to God is most profoundly shaped and where we experience the direct impact upon our lives.

Jesus had a nose for sniffing out religious lives that were more show than substance. As the gospel stories so often point out, Jesus saw into the heart of a person. This was especially true every time Jesus was confronted by the Pharisees as happens in today’s reading regarding the Tradition of the Elders. The traditions were religious practices that determined who had access to God. The rituals created the boundary of the religious community. In other words, the Tradition of the Elders was the line that made clear who was in and who was out. At issue in today’s reading is the tradition of washing hands before eating. First of all, this hand washing wasn’t about a concern for hygiene, like it is for us. Hand sanitizer wasn’t bottled in those days which, by the way, can be found in multiple places in this building and in this sanctuary. Our concern for hand washing is because we know about germs and the danger of bacteria. That wasn’t the case in the first century. Hand washing rituals were to insure that a person was spiritually clean. The Pharisees and scribes believed God only accepted those who were clean or pure, and it started with the hands. If a person’s hands were clean it followed that their life was clean. Clean hands meant open access to God. It’s not hard to see how The Tradition of the Elders easily became a “show towel” way of living the faith and this was a problem for Jesus. Focusing on what was on the outside of a person was the wrong place to start. Instead, Jesus taught, who we are with God is about what’s on the inside. Think about our own religious traditions. Coming to worship, reading the bible, saying the words of our prayers, even doing good things for others by way of serving and mission, all of this is what others see on the outside. The point Jesus makes is that doing these things does not necessarily determine how connected to God we are. It’s the inside that counts. It starts there and everything we do and say flows from the heart and for Jesus there is no heart God does not accept. There is no boundary to God’s ability to take hold of the center of our lives. Jesus dissolves every hard line of every rigid tradition that excludes others from God. God begins with our hearts. This is the message of Jesus for us today. Anyone, everyone has access to God because every life is accepted when God’s love is planted deep within our hearts.

Today we celebrate communion at all of our worship services. Holy Communion is one of the longest practiced traditions in the church. The table is open to all but it hasn’t always been that way. It wasn’t that long ago when the words we used on Communion Sundays went something like this. “Lord, I am not worthy to come to this your holy table...” Because the church connected communion with our sense of unworthiness some folks stayed away on communion Sundays. Some felt they could never become worthy enough. Some believed that all people had to do was look at their lives, what they did and said, and they would know they had no business coming to the Table of the Lord. For them, no amount of washing of hands or changing behavior could ever make them clean enough, so they stayed away. Over the years we’ve tried to make our practice of communion more in line with what Jesus taught. Every heart, every life is accepted. As we celebrate communion today you’ll hear me say, “This is an open table. You do not need to be a member here or a member anywhere. This is God’s food for all God’s people.” We celebrate holy communion today. It is holy not because of what we do or don’t do but because of God’s grace. It

begins in our hearts, where the gift of God's grace makes known the great love Jesus has for us. This is a love that includes you and me.

What does all of this mean for our lives and our faith? We find words in Psalm 151 that can be our prayer this week as we seek to live lives with God that begin on the inside. The psalmist says, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, put a new and right spirit within me." (Ps. 51:10) The Pharisees and scribes were not at all interested in the new thing God was doing. Not even the new thing God wanted to do in them. It doesn't have to be that way for us. God is ready to put a new and right spirit within us. It's the new thing God does in our hearts that can create new possibilities for us, even new ways of accepting and including one another.

Today we come to the table celebrating our communion with Christ. God is with us and not just at this table but always and everywhere because the true substance of our faith is that God's love has hold of our hearts.