

SUMMER

SERMON SERIES - 2021

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Pentecost 14

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

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There is More to It Than Handwashing

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of the disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. For the Pharisees and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; 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. 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?" He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

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Welcome to this summer sermon series that our Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada is providing for congregations throughout the summer months. I am Pastor Dennis Serfas, one of the part-time Assistants to the Bishop, for the Saskatchewan Synod. Supposedly, I am retired and live in Prince Albert. The last 20 years of my career were spent as the Director of Spiritual

Care for the Prince Albert Parkland Health Region. Prior to that, I was a parish Pastor for about 16 years, nine of which were spent here in this congregation of Messiah Lutheran, from where I am taping this sermon, and where my wife and I are currently members.

From the onset of today's gospel, it appears that the Pharisees would have been great advocates and supporters of the provincial and national Medical Health Officers, who have been setting guidelines to follow throughout the Pandemic, ensuring proper handwashing. Initially, it might appear that Jesus' defying the rules of the time, were similar to today's protesters in various cities and communities in our own country, regarding the laws that some felt were being imposed upon them since March of last year. Unfortunately, some were unable or unwilling to see past the regulations to the benefits for themselves and those around them. Similarly, in today's text from Mark's gospel, the Pharisees are having difficulty seeing beyond the Jewish ritual of washing hands. It's much more than that! And Jesus response to them certainly makes it much for than that, for them and for us today.

The Pharisees were all about the law; but it often was more about their own laws that they had created or were handed down to them. Today's reading starts by saying "The Pharisees and Scribes come from Jerusalem," the hotbed of both political and religious authority and power. Both do not seem to serve the very people they are supposed to take care of. Jesus sensed the hypocrisy in their question about his disciples eating without washing their hands. His curt response makes it clear that he wants to move on to the real heart of the matter, when he quotes from the prophet Isaiah, saying, "This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."

Some of you might recall the opening words of the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. Tevye, the dairyman who is always carrying on lengthy conversations with God, says to the audience. "A fiddler on the roof. Sounds crazy, no? It isn't easy. You may ask, why do we stay up here if it's so dangerous? We stay because this is our home. And how do we keep our balance?" He says, "That I can tell you in one word – tradition! Because of our traditions, we've kept our balance for many, many years. You may ask, how did this tradition start? I tell you – I don't know! But it's a tradition.

Tradition can be a good thing. Traditions can enrich life and faith. Traditions can provide structure and discipline. Traditions can be gifts to our communities. According to Wikipedia, a tradition is a belief or behavior passed down within a group or society with symbolic meaning or special significance with origins in the past. Every culture or ethnic group has their special traditions. Every denomination and congregation have their own specific traditions. Some of them are biblical; some of them are not; some of them are Lutheran; some of them are not. Some of them are important to observe; but others are not! Some of them are simply done because, well as Tevye says, "It's tradition.

Today's text from the gospel of Mark is about Tradition. Tradition is one of those words that for some people makes them feel very nostalgic with pleasant feelings from past experiences. Yet

for other people, the word makes them very uncomfortable. For many of our Indigenous brothers and sisters, it brings back memories of wounds that have never been allowed to heal, things that were done because they were told it would be good for them, rules that were put into place often in the name of religion and supported by the government and the church. So, obviously, the issue behind this confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees, was not about handwashing. Handwashing before eating, by itself, was and always will be a good practice for anyone. It just makes good sense. However, what does not make good sense, is when the human traditions that we have created, and still create, get in the way of and obscure and replace and misuse the good intentions of God's law.

As I prepared for today, this issue made me look at my own practices and assumptions; it made me ask, and I hope it will make you ask the question, "What things are we doing as the people of God, and as the Christian church in the twenty-first century, that gets in the way of the real message of the gospel; the message of the gospel that is intended to unite and heal and bring new life.

As I mentioned, the last 20 years of my career I worked as the Director of Spiritual Care in our local Health Region. I remember getting a call one day from the manager of the inpatient Mental Health unit, wanting me to see a patient who had requested a visit. The patient had experienced many kinds of abuse in her life, often not getting the proper supports that she needed. In the course of those events, she had gotten involved with one of our local faith groups, where doing the "right thing" often superseded doing the "compassionate and loving thing", a community where most things were black and white and you did what was expected of you. However, in this woman's life experiences, most things she struggled with were in the grey areas. I remember her saying to me, that some well-intentioned person from her church had questioned why she suffered from mental illness, and had concluded that if her faith had been stronger, and her prayers more sincere, then God would have relieved her of this illness.

Well, professionally I could not say what I really would like to have said! Instead, I spoke about the loving and compassionate God that I knew and prayed to. At the end of the conversation, the woman I was speaking with made the astute observation that her "church friend" was in a leg cast due to a bad break. She wittingly said to me "I guess her faith isn't strong enough either." She quickly realized how dangerous and hurtful it can be to focus on the requirements and misguided beliefs of an institution, rather than on caring for the real needs of people with understanding and compassion. Tradition often is and can be a good thing! However, when it gets in the way and harms and hurts and divides, it is not a good thing, and it is not a Godly thing either! In *Fiddler on the Roof*, tradition causes Tevye, a good man, to turn away his daughter because she married outside the faith.

My intention today is not to throw the Pharisees under the bus. They were a well-respected religious group, who were progressive in many ways. In Mark's story, they are a group that the audience would have trusted. Some scholars suggest that among the various Jewish groups of the time, Jesus' teachings would have been closest to those of the Pharisees. I guess it is kind of like when we get upset and riled up by people who remind us of ourselves. The difference

comes though when the Pharisees, in their attempt to make the “tradition of the elders” more relatable to the people, interpreted the law in order to give precise clear directions to follow. Unfortunately, they often couldn’t and didn’t follow their own directions. It was humanly impossible! Now, back to the question of handwashing.

As much as we may want to empathize with the Pharisees over what are best practices in certain situations, this is clearly not about handwashing. It never was. Instead, the religious authorities are holding the tradition that what is inside needs to be protected from what is outside! Sounds kind of familiar, doesn’t it! Jesus flips that around to say: It is not the outside world we need to protect ourselves from. Anything we could fear is already within ourselves. “There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile,” says Jesus, “but the things that come out are what defile.” In other words, our greatest enemy isn’t out there somewhere. The evil of the world begins from inside us.

It might be tempting to look to far-off times and far-off places where terrible things have happened and still do happen, where people are cruel to each other, and think that we ourselves would never make the same choices. Or maybe, for you, like for many people, the experience of horrific cruelty is not that far off at all.

The depth of the problem that Jesus is trying to point out for us is: That our goodness and our sinfulness, both, go all the way down. We cannot forget either one!

And as Lutheran Christians we have this tension and wrestle with it throughout our lives, or at least we should be wrestling with it! That we are created good, in God’s image, and our darkness’s come from within. That we are beautiful in God’s eyes and we are capable of terrible cruelty. I don’t have the answer. I doubt you do either!

But I do have an image intersecting two separate realities; of life and death, of total power and goodness, and of utter weakness and pain. It is the Cross, standing tall and pointing to God’s mercy. So, as we continue to grapple with these two realities of goodness and sinfulness, we know a day will come when every tear will be wiped away, and we will stand reconciled and in relationship with all those we have harmed, and all who have harmed us.

Jesus offers us forgiveness that makes us whole even while we are not yet healed.

Tradition comes from the Latin *traditio*, meaning “handing over.” Most of you worshipping in a church building today or listening to this sermon, are doing so because someone cared enough to hand over the faith to us. What will our faith look like in future generations?

The Pandemic with its severity, might be behind us, but both we and the world we live in, will continue to have other challenges that will need to be confronted. And here is something we can learn from the Pharisees after all. Because the tradition of the elders was in essence, a way

to remain in relationship with the Holy One, and with each other. Isn't that what we need to do? We need, more than ever, to stay in relationship as we listen to and get to know each other, so that our neighbors never become invisible to us. We have a long road ahead! But we have each other and we have God walking by our side.

In the name of God who created us good, and redeems us in our failures, and sustains us for the journey. Amen.