

September 2, 2018 Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas

GOSPEL

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

The holy gospel according to Saint Mark, the seventh chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

¹Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around [Jesus], ²they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. ³(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴and 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.) ⁵So 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?” ⁶He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

‘This people honors me with their lips,

but their hearts are far from me;

⁷in vain do they worship me,

teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

⁸You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

¹⁴Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

²¹For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²²adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Well...I have good news and I have bad news. Jesus is *not* going to talk to us about bread again today. The last five weeks were maybe enough for now. But...he *is* going talk about food.

It makes sense. Because *we* makes sense of our lives around shared tables.

Also, *The Great British Baking Show* has a new season on Netflix...so our house is being newly flooded with intricate plaited breads and choux pastries...but also with the stories of the flavors that each baker brings from their homes and gardens and family heritage.

There are meals where we are just...at home...meals that fortify us beyond the nutrients they contain. Has your mind started to conjure yours already? Is your mouth watering a little bit? I imagine you can think of the meal that makes you feel at peace, stronger, ready for what might be coming...more sure of who you are and where you come from.

For me, it is the chicken casserole that graced the table, both on special occasions...and...if I'm honest...when my mother's cooking creativity was worn a little thin. It is the flavor I can fully remember with just a word...with no effort at all.

Those meals make us feel more ready for whatever might come next.

I wonder how easy it was for Jesus and his friends to find meals like that. They were on the move...at different tables all the time...where the sauces and spices were maybe just a little different than the way it had been at home. Sometimes meals are also reminders that we are strangers.

But Jesus and his friends probably weren't strangers among the Pharisees they are eating with today. Because...frankly...the Pharisees wouldn't often eat with strangers because of the strictness of their customs around food and ritual purity. The fact that they were eating together at all belies familiarity...belonging to each other.

It is for this reason that some scholars think Jesus and his disciples might have been pretty closely connected to the Pharisaic movement – despite all Jesus' harsh words for Pharisees. We are sometimes harshest on our own kinfolk, after all.

But this ritual purity was very important to the Pharisees...not because impurity was sinful. It is important for us who don't understand Jewish history, culture and law so well to make that distinction (which I thank Old Testament scholar Cory Driver for calling to my mind as I prepared this sermon).

Despite where Jesus is about to go with this conversation...we can pause first and make that clarification...Purity or clean-ness is not sinlessness...and impurity or being unclean is not the same as sinning.

At its heart, purity is about being prepared. It is about being ready to come close to the Holy...to God. The immanent possibility of the Divine Presence led the people of Israel to keep themselves ready, pure, clean...according to the parameters given to them by God in the wilderness through Moses.

So, when you think about being clean, in this way, think about being ready...not about avoiding sin.

Ok...so then...what is Jesus trying to say when he gets so upset about the Pharisees concerns about keeping their customs? Customs that perhaps they expected the disciples would share? Customs that...if the disciples didn't share...it risked not only the disciples not being ready and pure...but those with whom they associated?

Jesus pivots away from rituals and purity...and begins to speak about evil and sin (which makes it understandable that we might have begun to conflate the two). He talks about how a person is made unclean when they harm others...when they sin by breaking relationships – by committing murder, by being unfaithful to their promises, by lying or being envious or proud.

Here, he is showing us that trying to be ready to come close to God has to include honoring our relationships to other members of our human family. How can we expect to be ready to be in relationship to God when we can't manage to be in relationship to each other?

Maybe even more than that...what if Jesus is telling us that we need to tend to our human relationships, not just to prepare us for God's presence as a kind of practice...but because it is precisely *in* those relationships where God's presence will come to us?

This reminds me of a recent conversation that our Listening Team had. The Listening Team is the group of people in the congregation helping facilitate the Missional River process helping us develop a culture of listening to God through Scripture, congregation and community to understand how our gifts and the community's needs fit together.

We have been reflecting on portions of the book of Acts...and one thing we noticed looking back on our readings is that the apostles were often sent by the Spirit beyond what was familiar...to people they would have seen as outsiders...And not only does God have a place for those outsiders...the apostles, themselves, are often transformed by their encounters with them. God is revealed to those of us who think we are insiders...just as much (maybe even more) than we help reveal God to those we might think are outsiders. It goes both ways.

Which led us to wonder as a team...What if, instead of turning up noses at the folks who say they are "spiritual but not religious" (for those of us who maybe wouldn't identify ourselves that way)...What if we looked to them and thought... "Gosh...we aren't always very good at embracing the movement of the Holy Spirit. She makes us kind of uncomfortable and confused, and we don't always know how to talk about her. Maybe these people know the Holy Spirit in ways we don't. I wonder what we could discover by spending time listening to them."

That Jesus would be more concerned with the web of relationships that stretches beyond all our categories of in and our and clean and unclean...is his way of saying that God comes close where we are often least prepared...which might mean that we can try to be ready by honoring our connections to others...and also...that if we feel like we are outsiders, strangers, or unclean...that God chooses to come close to us, too.

Jesus has gathered us around a meal again today. Maybe it is the home-cooked food that settles our spirits and makes us feel ready for what is next. Maybe today that table feels like a place where the flavors are strange and the customs are confusing. Either way, Jesus has come to offer us food to help us be ready to encounter the Divine Presence in this world...in each other...in places we don't expect.

I hope this week, that the Holy Spirit catches you around an unexpected corner...and I hope this time and place...that this meal...help you to feel ready for whatever is in store. Because, when the Holy Spirit does show up...it's hard to know what wonders are coming next.

May you be blessed with the holy, unexpected, close, and boundless presence of God. Amen.