

## ***When Rites are Wrong***

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

September 3, 2006

### **I.**

A famous heart surgeon had a two part theory of life. Part one was don't sweat the small stuff. Part two was — it's all small stuff. But is that really true? Is it all just the small stuff? Is there a larger picture we might be missing as we focus on the day-to-day pressures and problems and schedules of our lives.

Today's readings show the larger picture. All three lessons uniquely come together to call people away from their tendencies to focus on worldly things at the expense of godly things.

In the Old Testament lesson, Moses proclaimed the importance of God's commandments, and told the Hebrews they must keep God's Word. He said, "Keep your souls diligently, lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart."

In Ephesians, we heard about the spiritual warfare that rages in the world, and how Satan tries to keep God's Word from us. The writer made clear that we are not contending against flesh and blood, but "against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness."

Then, Mark's Gospel shows how both of these messages ring true in Jesus' rebuke of the Pharisees' teachings. He warned the people against worshipping with their lips but not their hearts, which was Moses' concern in the reading from Deuteronomy. And he told the people that even in the appearance of piety lurks the danger of worldly ritual that can separate the people from God and lead to a long list of evils that are fruits of the devil's work set forth in Ephesians.

So, there is a developing theme inherent in these separate but similar Scriptures spanning over a thousand years. True obedience, as envisioned by Moses, and standing firm in our faith against the works of evil, as described in Ephesians, will help us to hold fast to the Spirit so we can resist the ways of the world outside of us, which is the message of Mark.

### **II.**

At the center of this idea is today's Gospel, where Jesus found hypocrisy in the Pharisees for ignoring the commandments of God and elevating their own traditions to holy status. This is a serious charge. What happened to cause Jesus to say such a thing?

Well, the Pharisees, Jesus, and his disciples, were all in the same place eating. Mark does not say why they were there, but that's not important. Some of the Pharisees then complained that the disciples did not observe a ritual washing of their hands before they ate, which was one of their traditions, but which is not specifically commanded by Scripture.

Is this like my childhood when my mother did not let me come to the dinner table unless I had washed up? Somehow, I don't think the disciples' example would have gotten me very far.

But there is a point in that reference to my childhood. My mother was interested in hygiene, not ritual. For the Pharisees, it was the opposite. The point was not that the disciples did or did not have dirty hands, and it wasn't even that they might have washed their hands in some convenient way on their own. The point was that they did not engage in a specific form of ritual hand washing that had developed over time beginning with the so-called "elders."

So, Jesus called the Pharisees up short for putting form over substance. He told them that fellowship with God is not lost because people have unclean hands, but rather because they

have unclean hearts. And he was telling them that their rituals and traditions had become more important than God's word, and had obscured the meaning of Scripture.

### III.

How does that message speak to us today? Even more importantly, how does it speak to us as Episcopalians, with all of our ruffles and flourishes, and our vestments and robes, and our rituals and traditions that we are so hesitant to change?

In this respect, I am reminded of the question about how many Episcopalians it takes to change a light bulb. The answer is five; one to change the bulb, and four to stand around and reminisce about how good the old bulb was.

And in some ways my Baptist and Pentecostal friends might point to today's reading from Mark and suggest that the way we do things in the Episcopal Church takes after the Pharisees. That might be the case if all we care about is robes and vestments, and flowers on the altar, and soaring music, and church architecture, and creeds and collects and traditional prayers.

But I would respond by saying there is a very good reason why we Episcopalians do what we do. I would explain that our worship offers God the very best we have. We make an effort to show that we are serious and treat our rituals as visible expressions of the reverence and awe in which we hold God and creation.

Just as the Hebrews were required by God in the Book of Leviticus to sacrifice only unblemished animals, and just as they were told in Malachi that anyone who tries to hold back their good stock and sacrifice a sick or lame animal will be cursed, so also we do not hold back or treat worship casually. We utilize ritual and tradition as part of our obligation to honor God, not as an opportunity to entertain ourselves.

But I would agree with my friends from other denominations that if any religious tradition becomes obsessed with ritual, then it is easy to become diverted from worshipping God in spirit and truth. That is what Jesus was concerned about in his criticism of the Pharisees

And I also would agree that if ritual becomes an end in and of itself, rather than the means to the end, then faith can take the back seat. Again, this was what Jesus opposed.

It is important to note here that Jesus did not criticize rituals and traditions as such. Certainly the Jewish people over the centuries engaged in rituals, just as Christians in the early church did the same. Jesus instead was critical of how the rituals had become more important than the faith. He said that the way in which the Pharisees elevated their rituals undermined the more ancient and foundational Word of God.

Many of us probably are familiar with situations where peoples' actions in church were not driven by righteousness or faith. Perhaps they developed rituals and worship them because they are their own creations and can be controlled, or because rituals are more certain and satisfy their need to know what to expect. Sometimes rituals simply are less demanding and easier to accommodate than God's commandments.

I have seen situations in other churches where people were more concerned about what others thought of them than what God thinks. And some of those kinds of churches operate more like social clubs than the Body of Christ.

To those people I would say that they might as well fall down and worship each other because they certainly are not worshipping God. They might as well make idols of worldly things because they are not being reverent to godly things.

And this is where the dangers described in Ephesians can come into play. Satan does not try to destroy churches when it is much easier to corrupt them. And Satan does not tempt people with unpleasant things, but rather with things that on their surface seem acceptable.

The conflict in today's Gospel was not between Jesus and the bad guys. It was between Jesus and people who were trying to be too good. They were so obsessed with being good that they lost sight of their true reason for worshipping God.

And the reading from Ephesians talks about the "wiles of the devil." One of those designs is to lead people to believe that there is worldly comfort in continuing to do things the way they always have been done. In that comfort, however, lies the snare that can cause the appearance of piety to be substituted for true and sincere worship.

Just as Jesus saw through the comfortable rituals and traditions of the Pharisees, we are called in the church to look at our rituals, our traditions, and the ways in which we do things. Do we do these things to worship God or serve ourselves?

The Pharisees believed that in order to get close to God they had to rely on their tradition and rituals to prevent themselves from being impure. Jesus believed that the closer we get to God the more we become aware of our own impurity, and the more we rely on our faith as salvation.

For the Pharisees, godly people were those who had confidence and pride in their own goodness and righteousness. For Jesus, godly people were those who recognized uncertainty in their goodness, and were humble in their righteousness.

The Pharisees believed that their rituals gave them a firm grip on God. For Jesus, godly people believed that God had a firm grip on them.

## V.

At the end of the day, when it's all said and done, what makes a church a church, or a religion a religion, is not determined by what is outside coming in, but rather what is inside and goes out. Church attendance and Bible studies and committee meetings and the like are important and necessary, provided they are the means to the end and not the end itself.

Christianity begins as a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and then it becomes a community of faith in which Christians come together as Christ's Body to minister to each other.

The Pharisees did the second part, they came together as a body. However, Jesus recognized that they neglected the first part, their relationship with God.

I recall the story of the fellow who went to the same church for fifty years. He was asked if he saw a lot of changes during that time, and he said, "Yes, and I opposed every one of them."

It is possible that gentleman was more concerned about tradition and ritual than about the church's mission to its members and its community. Or, on the other hand, perhaps he was a guardian of the faith against assaults from the outside.

The test in either event is in our hearts. The Gospel tells us that once our rituals become holy, then what truly is holy becomes forgotten. And the other readings tell us that once the holy is forgotten, it will not be long before the spirit is corrupted and true worship no longer is possible.

So in this case, like in so many situations where good and evil contend for the souls of humanity, we turn to Scripture. In it is our strength and hope. Through it is our salvation. And with it we can turn away from those things that separate us from God, and genuinely worship God in truth and spirit. *Amen.*