

Pentecost 15B (9/2/2018)

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

Psalm 15

James 1:17-27

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

Purity of heart is a matter of integrity. Our hearts are divided between the ideals we espouse and the reality of our brokenness. And, Jesus perceives our hypocrisy, our inconsistency, nevertheless he wholly embraces us. He is the antithesis of hypocrisy, embodying the integrity of God, God's authentic and undivided grace. Claiming us as beloved, he establishes our center, our truest identity, and so he frees us to be courageously authentic, vulnerable, gracious.

Will you allow me to make an outrageous claim? Our Gospel from Mark today is not about Jewish religious practice. Of course, on one level, it is about Jewish religious practice, seeing as how it revolves around the question of Jewish religious practice. But, I want to avoid a common mistake in our interpretation of this story. Given the Gospel writer's simple, almost dismissive, description of the Pharisaic tradition of hand washing before a meal, Mark's audience is almost certain not to take it seriously. It feels like a narrative set-up. The Jewish elite are concerned with nothing more than empty ritual, we are quick to conclude, whereas Jesus is concerned with matters of the heart. But, the depiction of the Pharisees and scribes as legalistic and shallow is a mischaracterization, one that has led to a great deal of anti-Judaism over the centuries.

As experts in the law, the Pharisees and scribes seek to uphold proper Jewish practice out of fidelity to God. The law is a gift, ordering the people's lives in a manner consistent with God's covenant. Thus, Israel's adherence to

the law serves as a witness to the nations: “You must observe [the commandments] diligently,” Moses proclaims in our first reading from Deuteronomy, “for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples.... For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?” **From the perspective of the Pharisees and scribes, religious observance is a means of glorifying God in full view of the world.**¹

This insight makes it more difficult to dispense with their critique of Jesus: “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with ritually unclean hands?” Jesus and his followers are Jewish; if they don’t respect standard religious procedure, then they don’t respect the very thing that establishes and maintains Israel’s identity as a people chosen to be a blessing to the nations.²

Jesus’ response to their critique reveals that the issue at hand is not Jewish religious practice per se, but something more universal, something more fundamental to the human condition: “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites,” he says, “as it is written, “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”” In other words, the Pharisees and scribes are not to be censured for the shape of their piety, but rather for their hypocrisy, that is, for failing to integrate their religious ideals

¹ Elisabeth Johnson, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3758.

² Genesis 12:2-3.

with their true character. Their ritual purity is at odds with the impurity of their hearts.

And, **if Jesus indicts the Pharisees and scribes for hypocrisy, then it's an indictment meant for all of us.** Hypocrisy is not a Jewish problem; it's a human problem. The Greek roots of the word hypocrisy carry the meaning of "acting out a role," or "pretending." So, **hypocrisy signifies something deeper than dishonesty. It's the projection of a false self, a mask, a "fabricated persona that we wish to be," in place of our authentic self.**³ Hypocrisy is simultaneously public display and self-deception, the effort to keep up appearances for the sake of maintaining a self-image that **does not correspond to the truth of our internal lives.** It's Photoshop and Fakebook and disingenuous Christmas cards; it's moral pretension and respectability politics and the suppression of uncomfortable realities.

The opposite of hypocrisy is integrity. The word integrity stems from the Latin *integer*, which means "whole" or "complete." So, **integrity means more than honesty or decency. It refers to the unity of the self, a consistency of character across circumstances. A person of integrity resists self-deception and acknowledges her true gifts and limitations. She is grounded in her center. She knows herself. She "walks the talk" with regard to her identity and convictions.**

³ Loye Bradley Ashton, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 4, 22.

Both hypocrisy and integrity come to expression in our words and actions. As Jesus explains, “There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.” To borrow another biblical image, a tree is known by its fruit.⁴

Consider the story of the emperor’s seed, a Chinese folktale. There once lived an emperor who had no children and needed to choose a successor. So, he invited thousands of children from across his kingdom to the palace and gave each one a seed. “Take this seed home,” he instructed them, “plant it, and tend to it for one year. When you return, I will judge your efforts and choose my successor.”

A boy named Ling was among the children who received a seed, and he followed the emperor’s command, returning to his village, planting his seed in a pot, and tending to it diligently day after day. Yet, even after several weeks of care, his seed produced nothing. As time passed, Ling heard other children talking about the plants they were growing, how healthy and beautiful they were. But despite all his faithfulness, Ling’s seed never yielded a plant.

When it came time to return to the emperor’s palace, Ling was crestfallen. Nevertheless, he resolved to present his lifeless pot to the emperor as it was. Arriving with the other children, he saw their many plants of different shapes and sizes, and quietly lamented his failure to grow one of his own.

⁴ Matthew 7:20; Luke 6:44.

The emperor walked back and forth among the children, admiring their magnificent plants, and finally stopped in front of Ling's pot. "What happened here?" he asked.

"I tended to my seed as you commanded," Ling replied, "but I could not grow a plant." Some of the other children snickered to themselves.

"I see," said the emperor. Then, picking up the pot in his left arm and putting his right arm around Ling's shoulder, the emperor turned to face the other children. "A year ago, I gave you each a seed and told you to plant it and tend to it. The seeds I gave you, however, were boiled and useless. Yet, you have all managed to return with a plant in hopes that I might judge you worthy to become emperor. All except Ling. His faithfulness and integrity are more valuable than any proud display, so Ling here will be my successor."

Like the emperor, **Jesus is less concerned with outward displays of worthiness than he is with the condition of our hearts. And, purity of heart is a matter of integrity. Dear church, our hearts are divided between the ideals we espouse and the reality of our brokenness. Jesus perceives our hypocrisy, our inconsistency, nevertheless he wholly embraces us. He is the antithesis of hypocrisy; he embodies the integrity of God, God's authentic and undivided grace. Claiming us as beloved, Jesus establishes our center, our truest identity, and so he frees us to be courageously authentic, vulnerable, gracious.**