

Inside and Outside

September 1, 2024

James 1:17-27

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

I probably shouldn't tell you this. It's something of an open secret among clergy, that there is something "performative" about being a pastor. That is, ministers are aware that we have to present ourselves as someone worth imitating, while also knowing that some aspects of our characters or histories won't stand up to scrutiny. The truth is, we're aspiring to become the person we present ourselves to be.

But every once in a while, we yearn to spend some time in a "safe space," to speak more openly about this person who isn't quite what we aspire to be, and... well. Frankly, when we do, it sounds a whole lot like talking stink.

Which is a pretty good indication that religious leaders haven't changed all that much since Jesus confronted this set of visiting scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem. D. Mark Davis writes at [LeftBehindAndLovingIt](#), "I think the identification that these folks came from Jerusalem is significant. In Mark, Jesus' ministry is in Galilee, where he is enormously popular. The antagonists come from Jerusalem (in Judea) and Jesus only goes to Jerusalem during the last week of his life – to die." Back in chapter 3, another group of scribes from Jerusalem accused Jesus of being possessed by Beelzebul, so I think Rev. Davis is onto something here. Jesus had got along quite well with the local Pharisees, who probably considered him one of them, but the ones from the big city, well. They were looking for ways to discredit him.

They found one. Despite Mark's assertion, it wasn't true that regular handwashing was a practice of "all Jews" in the first century, but it was certainly highly recommended by the notable teachers of the day. For that matter, it's highly recommended by notable teachers of our day in schools, homes, hospitals, and so on. Not three years ago we guided people into this sanctuary past a set of sinks to make sure worshippers arrived with clean hands.

Our lectionary editors have somewhat helpfully, and somewhat not, removed a section of this text that explains why Jesus got so worked up. The people who criticized him and his disciples engaged in a practice that avoided their obligations to care for their aging parents. The greed and callousness that came out of them, asserted Jesus, defiled them much more than unwashed hands.

As Matt Skinner writes at [Working Preacher](#), "At least one part of this passage is straightforward, although disturbing: Jesus explains where evil comes from. It comes from within all those people who bug you. But also from within you. Me, too."

Ouch.

Debie Thomas writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, “Again, it’s easy for us to look down on the Pharisees, as if we in our enlightened modernity would never make their mistakes. But honestly, are we any different? Don’t we sometimes behave as if we’re finished products, with nothing new to discover about the Holy Spirit’s movements in the world?”

Ouch again.

Jesus did not reject the tradition of handwashing, we should note. He simply would not use it as a basis for religious condemnation, either of his own followers or anyone else. He also would not use one kind of religious obligation – making gifts to God – to avoid another kind of religious obligation – care for one’s parents. Most of all, he would not mistake the trivial for the vital. He would not mistake the somewhat important for the greatly important.

He would not – did not, and does not – misunderstand the complicated nature of the human heart, which contains side-by-side the evil intentions he listed so fiercely, and the positive intentions toward the virtues I can quote from last week’s reading from Ephesians: truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and reliance upon the Holy Spirit. James, writing many years after Jesus’ ministry in Galilee, reminded his hearers of this crucial theme in the life of Christian faith: not everything in the human heart is supposed to be brought out into the open, and the important things of the faith are not supposed to be locked away in there. “Human anger does not produce God’s righteousness,” wrote James, and haven’t we seen the truth of that a few times over the centuries? “Be doers of the word and not merely hearers,” wrote James. Don’t leave the truth, righteousness, peace, and all the rest remain within you, but let it be shared.

And oh, yes: “Care for orphans and widows in their distress.” If you feel like you’ve heard that one before, the prophets of the Old Testament said it. A lot.

And bridle the tongue. That’s one of James’ obsessions. We know a lot about the way words bring harm, too, don’t we?

Karoline Lewis writes, “We need only the ramping up of the political season to remind us that words and actions are a revelation of character. What we say and what we do reveal who we are. It is that simple. Jesus knew that. Mark wants us to know that. And we often forget that.”

Dr. Lewis wrote that in 2015, by the way.

And she also wrote this: “All of these texts articulate how hard it is to live what we believe, to speak our truth, to be willing to bring forth in our words and our actions what is in our hearts. And how hard it is to hear that what others hear from us does not seem to be us. That’s why

you need people around you who will tell you the truth when they see a disconnect between who you are and what you say and do.”

The gathering of the Church is not to enable ministers to talk stink. It’s to enable ministers – lay or ordained, because we all serve on Christ’s behalf – to help one another avoid talking stink. The gathering of the Church is not to condemn the failures of those inside or outside, but to support those who strive to learn from their failures and work towards their best. The gathering of the Church is not to establish a city on the hill inaccessible to those with unwashed hands, but to welcome in those who want to share the gifts that God has given them.

In this gathering, Jesus feeds us on the bread of life, and satisfies our thirst with the cup of blessing. As we come to Christ’s table shortly, let us find there the nourishment to move forward as disciples together.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson