

“Are they going to do it like that?”
The Rev. Lauren McDonald
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, VA
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Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

My favorite director used to tell a story on the first day of rehearsal. He was once directing a play about two women in a nursing home. On the first day of rehearsal, they were working on the scene in which the two women meet. The third time through the scene, one of the actors sweetly offered a line to the other one who looked at the director and said, “Is she going to do it like *that?*” My friend says that the trust between the two actors was broken in that moment and it was never recovered. The one woman never trusted the other one again. He said, “The rehearsal room remained so icy you could chill Cokes.” For every show my friend directed after that, he told this story and said he never wanted to hear another actor say, “Is she going to do it like *that?*”

When I read our Gospel passage for today, this story came immediately to my mind. Although the circumstances are significantly different, the Pharisees are essentially looking at Jesus and asking about the disciples, “Are they going to do it like that? Are they going to eat with unholy hands? There are rules, you know. Laws. Ways that we do things. This behavior is ritually unclean and unacceptable. How can you permit these uncouth barbarians to eat with you?” Well, maybe they didn’t go that far. But they were challenging Jesus as to why his disciples were flaunting tradition.

And Jesus calls them on it. “You hypocrites,” he says. “What Isaiah wrote is true of you – You honor me with your lips but not your hearts, following human tradition instead of God’s commandments.” That must have been confusing for the Pharisees. They thought the disciples and Jesus were the ones abandoning God’s commandments, not them. They were trying to adhere to the commandments as they knew them. They thought they were being faithful.

It’s easy for us to condemn the Pharisees for what appears to us to be unreasonable concern over trivialities. It’s easy for us to say, “Why were they doing it like that?” Their desire to follow tradition might seem to be an absurd obsession with cleanliness. And indeed, some ritual practices lose their meanings over time. When I was in seminary my liturgy professor had us read a book about public prayer. In it the author told a story about a sacred cat. I love the story, so I’m going to digress for a moment and share it:

“Once upon a time, there was a guru in the mountains of Asia who gathered around him a band of monks dedicated to prayer. The guru owned a cat, which he loved deeply. He took the cat with him everywhere, even to morning prayer. When the disciples complained that the cat’s prowling distracted them, the guru bought a leash and tied the cat to a post at the entrance to the prayer room. Years later, when the guru died, his disciples continued to care for the cat. But, as they say, cats have nine lives, so the cat outlived even the disciples. By then the disciples had their own disciples, who began caring for the cat, but without recalling anymore why the cat was present during prayer. When the cat’s leash wore out, they knitted another

one in the sacred colors of the sky and the earth; and when the post wore down, they built a beautiful new one that they began calling the sacred cat stand. During this third generation of disciples, the cat died, and the disciples wasted no time in buying another sacred cat to accompany them in prayer. Their worship was eventually expanded to include the sacred actions of tying the cat to the leash and affixing the leash to the sacred cat stand.”¹

I love this story and how it reminds us that people can get attached to traditions they don't understand or that have lost their meaning over time. It can happen in liturgy and worship. It can happen in prayer. It can happen in the ways we practice our religion. But I don't think that the Pharisees were worshipping a sacred cat. In their attention to the details of purity, they were trying to be faithful to the tradition as they had learned it. It had meaning for them. The traditions were there to bring them closer to God. Washing the hands before eating was a way of insuring they were eating with holy hands. It was a way to honor God.

So why did Jesus chastise them? Not because their traditions were without meaning for them, but because they had lost the heart of what they were doing. In paying such strict attention to codes and the details of traditions, they had become lost to what God had intended in the first place. To understand this better it might help to look at some verses that the lectionary writers left out of today's passage. In the missing verses Jesus explains the difference between human tradition and the commandment of God by using the example of one of the ten commandments.

¹ Lawrence A. Hoffman, *The Art of Public Prayer: Not for Clergy Only* (Woodstock, Vermont: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2003,) 38.

Jesus says, “Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’” Part of honoring father and mother would mean helping to support them when they got older. But the Pharisees supported a tradition in which people offered goods to the temple as Corban. To offer goods in this way meant that they could not be used in any other way once they had been dedicated to the temple. Jesus argues that this tradition caused people to disobey the commandment “Honor your father and mother” because children were saying to parents, “We can’t help support you in your old age because we gave our money to God.” It’s a difficult argument to understand in our time, but the gist of it is that the Pharisees are supporting a human tradition that causes the people to turn their backs on the heart of a true commandment of God. There’s nothing wrong with offering goods to the temple per se, but doing so at the expense of honoring one’s parents abandons God’s commandment.

Jesus then goes on to deal with the issue that started the argument, explaining that it’s not what goes into people from the outside that defiles them or makes them unholy, it’s what comes out of their hearts. They can wash their hands all they want, but if they give in to evil intentions like lying, stealing, murder, greed, adultery, envy, pride, etcetera, then none of that cleansing matters. What matters is what comes out of their hearts. Jesus complains that the Pharisees’ hearts are far from God, even as they observe their traditions. They may pay strict attention to outward purity, but they’ve forgotten that what really matters is taking care of those around them. Washing hands to make them holy is fine, as long as they’re also making sure their hearts are clean.

Our epistle lesson echoes that same idea. In the letter from James we hear, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” Care for orphans and widows, the poor and the homeless, the weak and the oppressed, those whom society has cast aside. Care for them. And don’t let the world fill our hearts with its vices, with lying and deception and pride and greed. Care for those in need and keep our hearts clean and pure. If we hold to these commandments, then maybe the world will look at us and say, “Are they going to do it like that? If so, sign me up!”