

"Kingdom Stories Worth Retelling"

NT: Mark 7:1-23

James, in 1:17-27, echoes this Kingdom story worth retelling with a teaching of his own.

So, my very dear friends, don't get thrown off course. Every desirable and beneficial gift comes out of heaven. The gifts are rivers of light cascading down from the Father of Light. There is nothing deceitful in God, nothing two-faced, nothing fickle. He brought us to life using the true Word, showing us off as the crown of all his creatures.

Post this at all the intersections, dear friends: Lead with your ears, follow up with your tongue, and let anger straggle along in the rear. God's righteousness doesn't grow from human anger. So throw all spoiled virtue and cancerous evil in the garbage. In simple humility, let our gardener, God, landscape you with the Word, making a salvation-garden of your life.

Don't fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other. Act on what you hear! Those who hear and don't act are like those who glance in the mirror, walk away, and two minutes later have no idea who they are, what they look like.

But whoever catches a glimpse of the revealed counsel of God—the free life!—even out of the corner of his eye, and sticks with it, is no distracted scatterbrain but a man or woman of action. That person will find delight and affirmation in the action.

Anyone who sets himself up as “religious” by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world. (The Message)

We need to hear these teachings as much as the people and disciples needed to hear Jesus' and James' words so long ago. Why? Because we need to be constantly reminded of what is important to God and what can be simply released into the air like a balloon taking flight. One could argue that what we are talking about today is authentic Christianity. One could also say these texts charge us to be people of the Word, centered at the core with God. To get to this point, we must look beyond and dig deeper.

I came across a pastor's reflection that reads, "One Sunday morning I came into my office to find a note quickly scribbled and left on my desk. The author of the note wrote something like, "It seems that our youth don't know how to spell any better than they know the bible." I walked to my doorway where I had a good view of the newly created bulletin board that welcomed kids and adults to the Sunday school wing of the church. In bright, happy colors it invited one and all to attend "Sunday Skool!" I chuckled as I realized that their intent was to get people's attention... and it had worked. I may have been mildly amused, but I also found myself angry. I knew the young people who had created the bulletin board had sacrificed part of their Saturday so we could feel

welcomed to a new season of Sunday school. The people who had left the note on my desk was missing the deeper Christian meaning. The correct spelling of Sunday school is not important. Welcoming all into God's kingdom is important."

In today's story from Mark, I think Jesus might be feeling something similar. We do tend to focus on the mundane, because facing the sins that stain our own hands, as Jesus highlights, is rather painful.

The earliest of Jewish religious traditions included many laws concerning ritual purity or holiness, in conformity with Leviticus 19:2, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." The Pharisees took seriously the command of Exodus 19:6, "You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." They argued that this meant that all Israelites should be as holy as priests, and that consequently all Jews should wash their hands before eating. Expectations were high and consequences for not following the rules were severe as refusal, judgment, and excommunication topped the list of penalties.

To be clear, when Jesus responds to the Pharisees and scribes in this story, Jesus does not condemn their rituals and beliefs or denounce their important role in first-century Judaism. When Jesus turns the table on their concern, he does so as a deeply religious Jew who cites the prophetic tradition of Israel in denouncing the selfish interests of the scribes and Pharisees. It wasn't the rituals that were the problem. It was the inconsistency of the hearts of the scribes and Pharisees who were dictating the rituals that was the problem.

With a direct reference to the Pharisees, each of the attitudes and actions Jesus names reflects a heart that has turned away from God. Each of these also impacts our relationships with others so that personal sin has social consequences. The Pharisees had come to a point where they had lost their way. They had become confused as to what was ultimately important to God. What does Jesus do? Two things:

1. First, he gets their attention by calling them out? By using a word none of us wish to be associated with. The word Jesus used is hypocrite: a word meaning to "act out a theatrical role" and "pretend." By using this word, Jesus is calling out a disconnect. A disconnect of what? A disconnect between moral values and standards that we espouse and those that we actually practice in our behavior. Hypocrisy is a negation of authentic life. Hypocrisy is a life acted out to fool others, a role that we take on and pretend to be, that is not really us. Hypocrisy is a denial of our authentic self in favor of the fabricated persona that we wish to be. In this specific story, religious hypocrisy is a most destructive kind in that it uses sacred teachings about Truth itself to elevate self-deception. It makes our pretending both a distortion of truth and a substitute for it. The hypocrisy of religious people not only damages the

credibility of the message but creates idolaters who are convinced that their pretend faith is not idolatry at all. Unfortunately, hypocrisy in the church is as common to our experience as love and hate. What Jesus is pointing to here in this story is the quintessential human struggle to discover and maintain the integrity of self.

2. Second, Jesus rattles off a list of behaviors unacceptable to God. "Fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly = unacceptable to God." In case you were wondering, four of these are included in the original ten commandments.

Jesus is saying in this kingdom story worth retelling that when we think and speak and act like the Pharisees, who appear to be focused only on the ritual traditions, we have become fixated on the wrong things. We learn then that what makes Israel acceptable to God is not correct performance of ritual acts or the obedience to the letter of civil and religious law as the Pharisees were so fixated. What makes Israel acceptable to God, and what makes us acceptable to God, as Jesus emphasizes, is being authentic people of the Word centered at the core with God.

If our goal in life, our central focus, is to be in right relationship with God, and subsequently one another, then we must do everything we can to refrain from hypocritical attitudes and actions that turn our hearts away from God.

Therefore, one of our challenges today considering this story is to recognize how we, like the Pharisees, may misinterpret what is ultimately important to God. For example, do we look at the dirty fingernails of our brothers and sisters and think to ourselves, "They don't belong here?" Do we hear a rustling noise or change in music tune during worship and think to ourselves, or even whisper to our neighbor, "That shouldn't be allowed in worship?" Do we notice a bulletin board with creative language and make a judgment on someone's intelligence, "It seems our youth don't know how to spell any better than they know the bible?" One pastor declares, "It can be sad to think about just how good the church has become at putting our energy into keeping people out of our sanctuaries, rather than examining the sins that may stain our own lives." We don't like the sound of that, but it is sadly true.

In wrestling with this, it is important for us to not limit our thoughts to only outward expressions. It is believed that our behaviors are birthed out of a sacred place, our heart, and so we must dig a little deeper to understand why we do what we do and say what we say. Heart is mentioned three times in this story signifying the importance of the human heart for religious faith and practice. The heart is thought to be the center of one's will and decision-making ability, so to turn one's heart away from God or to have it filled with evil intentions is a grievous sin. This story today is really a challenge for us to examine our own hearts.

Paul Tillich, a 20th Century theologian, described self-integration as one of the three basic functions of life, with self-creativity and self-transformation being the other two. What he meant was that, in order for life to be actualized from its potential being, it has to unfold in a process of finding our center, moving out from it in freedom and courage, and returning to it again enriched and deepened. Self-integration is about the center, the core. The center is the core of self; it cannot be divided, but it can be strengthened. To move out from our center is to exercise our freedom, to risk disintegration, and this act is essentially a moral act, a function of the realm of the spirit. Tillich would say that spiritual health is the moral integrity, the self-integration of a person's center, whereas spiritual disease is the breakdown of moral integrity, the disintegration of a person's center.

Hypocrisy is a spiritual disease. Hypocrisy erodes our center by promoting disintegration rather than self-integration; moral inconsistency and disconnection from the dimension of the spirit rather than a deeper center in greater communication with the healing power of spirit. Hypocrisy then is a tool that tears us apart from our authentic self.

We can also consider the perspective of theologian Robert Cummings Neville who builds on Tillich's model of self and describes the human condition of sin as being divided against oneself in one's very being. His basis is this. That human beings are created to be in a normative covenant with their Creator; therefore, moral transgressions against the covenant are also transgressions against their own created being. To follow the covenant, to be in right relationship with God, is to do right by striving to avoid harming one's neighbors, institutions, and nature.

Soren Kierkegaard says, "purity of heart is to will one thing." This one thing is Good. For only in the good do we find truth and authenticity. Only by willing one thing can we achieve our true and authentic self. For Kierkegaard, to will the Good is to will the eternal and the true at the same time. It is to will as God wills. Indeed, it is to will God, and to decide to make a choice for God.

I stumbled upon a 13-fold definition of a great person this week. Whereas we don't want to be associated with the word hypocrite, we all want to be and to be known as a great person, right? According to this definition, a great person is:

- A person of integrity and values that he or she will never compromise. He or she is a great family man or woman who puts their family first and would protect them with their own life.
- A person who is willing to help anyone that needs it. Come torrential downpours or Nor'easter snowstorms, they are there when called. Always helping and never hurting.
- A person who is respectful of other people's feelings and needs but holds his or her position highly and never retreats from negative situations, but only stays in them to make peace.

- A person who allows nothing to stand in his or her way of doing the right thing by everyone and will always admit wrong with an apology.
- A person who never hurts anyone's feelings intentionally and if they do it unknowingly, will humbly apologize, put out the fire and then work it out.
- A person who will always be on time and never late. Frequent tardiness to an appointment or anything that has a structured time frame is unacceptable, and if it does happen, offer that apology and never let it happen again.
- A person who is a provider- to their family and the foundation on which the family lies. He or she never will let cracks form in their foundation and compromise the structural integrity of it.
- A person who is a giver, and not a taker- a forgiver and not a resentment holder- a peacemaker and not a fighter.
- A person who is a teacher, a fireman, a policeman, a nurse, a soldier, a volunteer, a case worker or a dss worker, or many more occupations of helping people.
- A person that fails time after time while doing their best and never, ever quits because when they quit, part of them dies when they quit.
- A person who always puts the needs of others in front of their own. Always being kind and never showing anger.
- A person who has dreams and goals and never lets other people's negativity get in their way of pursuing them.

A great person is authentic. A great person is a person of the Word, centered at the core with God. A great person is a person who overflows with God's goodness and love.

None of us are perfect. Let's accept that because it is true. And let's come together in faith of God's good news of love and grace for us all because we are all better when we are our authentic, God-created self.

Let all God's people say... Amen.