

Proper 17 B 2021
August 29, 2021 :: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
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“The Contagion of Purity.”

It probably goes without saying that certain passages of scripture, like our reading from Mark’s gospel — passages, in other words, that describe a dispute between Jesus and the Pharisees — that passages like these have probably contributed to Christians thinking less of Jews in general, and less of Pharisees in particular. In fact, listed among the modern definitions of the word “Pharisee,” are “a self-righteous person,” and “a hypocrite.” And that’s too bad, because Jews and Christians have remarkably similar theologies when it comes to God.

For example, like us, the Jews of Jesus’ day — and the Pharisees in particular — were people who believed:

that God was present with his people, and
that God cared tremendously for his people;

that people could have an intimate
relationship with God, and that God could be
just as present in your kitchen, workplace, or

bedroom, as God was present in the Temple,
the synagogue, or the church;

that God's love and acceptance was *not*
reserved only for the Jewish people, but that
God would gladly receive *anyone*; that God's
door was wide open to *everyone*;

and that God had a keen interest in the needs
of the poor, the stranger, the sick, and the
outcast; and that the *people* of God needed to
respond in meaningful ways to those needs,
because that was the *only* way they could be
salt, and light, and yeast in and for the world.

In other words, Jesus and the Pharisees weren't caught up in
endless disputes because their theological world-views were so
different; but rather because they were so similar. The problem
was that so many of the Pharisees had failed to take that next step,
that would finally synchronize their world-view to that of Jesus.
Which begs the question: "If the Pharisees and Jesus were so very
similar, where specifically did they differ? Why so many disputes?"

The short answer, I think, is the main point of this morning's gospel reading, and it had to do with the purpose and application of the Jewish purity laws.

QUICK LESSON: The Jews believed that people, places, and things could exist either in a state of ritual purity, or in a state of ritual impurity. Those in the former group were able to participate in the religious practices of their faith, and could have a relationship with God, wherein they could receive the blessings and grace of God. Those in the latter group, however, not so much! And since being in a relationship with God was arguably the most important thing a person could do, it was critical, therefore, that a person do everything in their power to remain in that state of ritual purity. And to do that, you needed to follow certain ancient practices and procedures.

And so, in our gospel reading this morning, we hear how the Pharisees observe some of Jesus' disciples, who

“were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them.”

Now, their concern wasn't about hygiene, but about the risk of becoming impure, by their failure to follow the ancient traditions of ritually washing their hands before and after a meal.

In other words, to a culture that is concerned — if not outright obsessed — with staying in a state of ritual purity, there was the sense that there is so much “out there” in the world, that if it came into contact with us, that it could “defile” us; it could cause us to become impure. And in their minds, those things were like contagions; they were things to be guarded against, and avoided at all costs.

And it's against this mind-set that Jesus makes his response. And it's a response that is both subversive, *and brilliant*. Because, basically, what Jesus does is to redefine the whole dynamic of ritual purity and impurity.

And he redefines it *away from* a being system that is concerned with “What's out there, that might contaminate me, and make me impure?” And he redefines it *towards* being a system that is concerned with “What's within me, that might be used by God to purify and cleanse the world?”

So, to put the situation in overly-simplistic terms: the Pharisees sought to preserve their purity by isolating themselves from the impure things of the world. Whereas Jesus was teaching his followers to bring their purity — to bring their acceptability to God, their wholeness, their gifted-ness — out into the world, as a catalyst in their relationships with the people of the world.

Can you get a sense of what Jesus is doing? He is proposing, for example, that we intentionally become a community that is as repulsed at hearing someone utter a word that is harmful or wounding or degrading, as we would be repulsed to learn that our dinner was prepared by someone who routinely failed to wash his or her hands. Think about that.

And if we could do that, can you imagine how much more positively the world would view churches? If every congregation put as much effort into ensuring that our children weren't infected with racism or pride, as we do to ensuring that they're not infected with salmonella at the potluck, can you imagine how things might change?

Now, if we could do that, that would be so cool. But that's not the most radical implication of what Jesus teaches about purity. Because what he seems to be suggesting is that *purity* is every bit as contagious as impurity. And, in fact, he is suggesting that the purity which God grants us, might even be able to overpower the impurity we encounter in the world!

What Jesus is teaching us, in our gospel reading, is that it is possible to live in such a way — it's possible to display, in our relationships, a quality and consistency of *agapé* love — that things which the world might just write off as irredeemable, are actually transformed into things that bear witness to God's power to redeem. This is tremendously radical stuff!

So, to recap: If it's "what goes in" that makes someone impure, then, yes, people need to guard carefully against coming into contact with the wrong sort of people, or the wrong sort of things. But if it's what flows out of people, in loving and selfless relationships, that radiates purity, then we are freed to live making decisions, about who we can interact with, based on love, and not in fear. That is an incredibly liberating, and transformative insight. One I'm not sure I've entirely wrapped my mind around.

And there's one further insight from Jesus' view of purity, that might be more radical still. If purity is something radiated out, by how we are in relationships, then we actually *need other people* for a life of holiness.

For example, if true purity is about exercising forgiveness, then we *need* to take the risk, of staying in relationship with people the world thinks are hopeless, in order to witness and experience God's holiness.

If true purity involves exercising compassion, then suffering in the world isn't proof that God doesn't care; but rather, it's an opportunity to experience and proclaim just how much, and in what ways, God *does* care.

And if true purity is about relationships, then the challenges facing us as a church — as a community of flawed and bickering and broken people — those challenges are an opportunity to understand God's grace more deeply, and proclaim it more powerfully, by insisting that reconciliation be the first, middle, and final word.

Is that possible? If Jesus is right, if what's "out there" doesn't make us impure, but rather that purity flows out in relationship, then there's nothing "out there" that isn't beyond what can be transformed by God's holy, and by God's holy-making, love.

And that, my friends, is great news! And that's what Jesus is teaching us, in this Sunday's gospel; and that's the example we have in Jesus' manner of life. And it's an example which posed a profound challenge to his Pharisaic brothers, just as much as it challenges the church today. But, do you know what? We know more than those Pharisees. And, therefore, I believe we can do more. Let's at least try!

Amen.