

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
8:00 and 10:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost; August 30, 2015

“The Point after All”

Scripture: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23; 14 Pentecost B (Proper 17 - RCL)

Jesus goes off pretty hard on the Pharisees this morning, don't you think?... Calls them hypocrites; basically and entirely insults their religious integrity. Hey, it was just a question. *“Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”*

But those Pharisees must have asked Jesus some kind of a loaded question, because if it was only about personal hygiene, well... no big deal. All of us would agree that clean hands make for safer eating. But there's more to it. What we have to understand is that the religious leaders in Jesus' time had taken hygiene to a whole new level. If cleanliness is next to godliness, then the Pharisees must have intended to rub shoulders with the Almighty all day long, because everything they do is elevated to a religious necessity. Washing your hands? It's a rule! Cleaning the pots? A rule! Cleaning the cups? A rule! Cleaning the kettles? A rule! *Religious* rules. To not undertake such functions as these wasn't simply considered bad hygiene; it was considered an affront to God Almighty. And that's where the real question comes from. The Pharisees weren't so much asking why Jesus and his followers were such

sloppy eaters; they were basically asking: “Why are you and your followers such an insult to God?”

Well, that did it! That stirred Jesus’ dander! An insult to God, were they? And why were they such an insult? Because they didn’t always wash their hands?!? Really? Did the Pharisees even notice anything else they were doing? Were they an insult because they travelled the countryside and healed the sick? Or because they fed hungry people? Were they an insult because they chose to forego worldly goods and power? Or because they didn’t shun the dirty, uncouth person or the prostitute or the homeless person, or the leper or the tax collector? Did Jesus and his followers insult God because they worshipped in the Temple, and taught in the synagogues, or told people they ought to forgive one another? Is that why they were such an insult?

No wonder Jesus is fired up! I’m fired up! How quickly we human beings can hide behind the rules of “appropriate” religious behavior and completely forget that the very basis in our faithful existence is not some unwavering adherence to holy catechisms and codes learned by rote, *but an unwavering adherence to the one rule we can be commanded to follow but never forced to fulfill*: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” All of it, all this enterprise of Church, all this work of religion is for naught without this foundation settled in our hearts.

You know, I do not doubt that the Pharisees indeed were sincere in their practices, and perhaps their fastidious rituals and deliberate religious hardships were simply a way of trying to show devotion to God. I mean, God knows we Episcopalians can do the same sorts of things with our pomp and circumstance, our processions and our propers, our creeds and rubrics, our prayers drawn from a book. And maybe what has been missed in the good efforts of the Pharisees, and maybe sometimes us, may not be the “love of God” part, rather the second piece of the mystery, which is no less critical, but far more problematic: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” It is often here that I believe we break down in the life of faith. To love God is not to love God only, but our love of God is clearly expressed in the way we love our neighbors, the way we treat other persons with whom we cross paths in this life, the way we perceive those who are different from us, the way we choose to reach out to those we might help, or the way we hide from this responsibility. How important it is that we not elevate the importance of our religious traditions and practices beyond the call to love others and treat them as we would wish to be treated ourselves.

I’ll tell you why I think Jesus was so upset with the Pharisees... While the religious leaders were demanding that others, including Jesus’ disciples, follow the letter of the Law, they were at the same time basically ignoring the call to love one another. “You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition,”

Jesus tells them. And he is right... You can eat what you will ---dirt and germs and all--- but that won't make you a greedy person. Dirty pots don't make you slanderous or prideful or unduly prejudiced or wicked. You can't blame adultery or lying or violence on a dirty cup. If we miss the greatest commandment of all ---to love one another---, well, then, we miss the whole point!

I'll give you an example where this all comes home for me... an example where human tradition meets the commandment of God. You know that for nearly a thousand years the tradition of much of the western Church --- certainly the Roman Catholic Church--- has been the celibacy of the clergy. Well, I remember a time when I was out to eat with my daughter, and I was wearing my clergy outfit. And the waiter approached our table. Then he stopped and took a long look at me; then he took a long look at this young girl sitting at the table with me in a pretty obvious sort of father / daughter moment. And I could just see the wheels spinning in his head, until he finally blurted out: "Aren't you a *priest*?" And I said, "Yes, I'm an *Episcopal* priest." And he said: "What's the difference?" And I said, "Well, I'd like to introduce you to my daughter, Candice, and it's okay for me to do that!" And then we laughed and talked a little more about my ministry and the peculiar life of our Episcopal Church, about our engagement with the world and our sometimes-clumsy ways of trying to love one another in a church both "traditional" and "liberal" at one and the same time. And I remember the waiter said, "That's cool." And I was so glad to be part

of a church that lets love challenge our traditions, a church that lets me have a family of my own *and* be a priest. I'm so glad to be part of a church that struggles to ensure all the clergy may do the same. I'd like to believe that some of our so-called "liberalness" as a church ---our propensity to engage with the times, our willingness to take social risks, our ability to confront change--- for better or for worse, are because of love, because we're trying to love others as we love ourselves. Isn't that what Jesus was asking of his people? Isn't that what he is asking of us?

I like the way Episcopal priest Robert Capon puts it: "[The Church] is not here to bring to the world the bad news that God will think kindly about us only after we have gone through certain creedal, liturgical and ethical wickets; it is here to bring the world the Good News that 'while we were yet sinners, Christ died for the ungodly.'"

How different our world might be if we asked the questions that love requires in our deliberations with others. What could come from creative hearts if we asked if our business decisions were expressions of love? If our political parties gauged their platforms on whether they seemed expressions of love for all people? If our entertainment, our religion, our family life were rooted in the demands of love? If our churches were entirely open to the risks of love, our outreach ministries were chosen and participated in as fulfillments of love, if our time and money were given because of love? Hey, it's just a question...