

Rev. Shannon Kershner
August 30, 2009
Woodhaven Presbyterian Church
22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Mark 6:53 – 7:9

WHOOSH!

Just pay attention to the names of the places, and you will feel the tension rising:

Gennesaret—where Jesus and the disciples have moored the boat and gotten out.

Jerusalem—the city from whence the Pharisees and the scribes have traveled to catch up with Jesus.

Gennesaret—a land full of people who were not Jewish, but Gentile and therefore considered outside the covenant.

Jerusalem—the holiest place that existed for Jesus' Jewish tradition—the place of the Temple.

Gennesaret—a place full of people who immediately recognized Jesus as the Healer and brought to Jesus everyone they knew who was sick.

Jerusalem—a place full of the keepers of the tradition—people who cared deeply about their faithfulness to God, and who were, therefore, very suspicious of anyone who dared to call that faithfulness into question—especially this Jesus and his disciples.

Gennesaret and Jerusalem. You already feel the tension rising just by paying attention to the theological geography embedded in the text.

So given such a high level of tension, I suppose it should not surprise us that this argument between Jesus and the Pharisees erupted. Clearly, from the level of emotional reaction, this tension had been building for quite a while. So when the Pharisees asked that one question, “Why do your disciples eat with defiled hands?”, it was as if they had dropped a lit match into a pile of kindling. WHOOSH went Jesus. “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’” Goodness gracious, what has gotten into him? Gentle Jesus, meek and mild? Not today.

This is clearly a story with a level of complexity that we cannot glean from simply a surface reading. So let us step back for a minute to try and figure out **why** the Pharisees would care about the disciples' hands in the first place. Why would they even ask about the fact that the disciples ate without washing their hands? That question sounds awfully nitpicky and legalistic. But in fairness to the Pharisees, they were not trying to be nitpicky or legalistic. Rather, they were just doing what they had been charged to do—they were being the keepers of the tradition.

The Jewish people lived in a culture that was inhospitable to their identity. Polytheistic religions and cults abounded. The Romans were the ones in charge and were always reminding the Jews of their lower ranking in the social pecking order. And in the middle of that cultural chaos, in the middle of that Roman domination, in the middle of that constant threat of syncretism, the Jewish people were desperate to remain faithful to their one God, the God of their Exodus, the One who took them from slavery and led them into freedom.

They were desperate to hold on to their unique identity as God's chosen people. But the act of holding on to that identity was becoming more and more difficult as time passed and as the world grew more complex. So many other voices were ready and more than willing to define them. Voices that did not belong to the One who had given them breath and called them "My people."

The religious leaders saw the struggle of their people. And so, in their desire for spiritual devotion, in their desire to maintain their unique identity, the Pharisees began to adopt distinctive practices. The Pharisees began to interpret the Jewish law in ways that provided for concrete actions—both big and small. So when the Jewish person performed that practice, their identity would be proclaimed.

For example, washing one's hands before a meal was not universally practiced. Therefore, when a Jewish person washed his or her hands before eating, through that small action, that person was saying to the world "I am different." He was doing something distinctly Jewish. She was keeping the tradition and keeping the boundaries.

The purity laws came into existence to protect their Jewish identity. All of those purity laws were about separateness and distinction—drawing a clear boundary about one's faith, one's Jewishness, in order to stand in contrast to the worldly chaos that swirled around them. Washing one's hands before a meal was an identity marker. It told everyone who they were. And it reminded them whose they were.

I have been trying all week to translate this kind of boundary drawing, identity marking ritual to our time and context. One possible parallel is our order of worship – the way our worship is structured. Whenever I teach an Inquirer's class, I always walk through a bulletin in order to try and explain the form of worship. Why do we begin with a call to worship? Why do we include a corporate prayer of confession? What is this Doxology and Gloria Patri? Why do we have a charge and benediction? As a class, we walk through each section of the bulletin. And frankly, when all is said and done, it boils down to this: *We do what we do because it tells us who we are.*

We are a people who come to worship not just out of chance or because we feel like it, but because we believe God has called us here. We are a people who gather around a Living Word whom we seek in the words of Scripture, in proclamation, in prayer and in music, so all of those elements of worship are equal and crucial. We are a people who confess together because we know that we all miss the mark as individuals and as a community of faith. Therefore, we always need a chance to come clean with God and to be assured of God's continual forgiveness. We are a people linked with the faithful who have come before us, which is why we sing Latin songs that were first sung in the Church in the 300's. And we are a people who are sent out into the world with a charge and a blessing to bear God's good news of salvation for the Gospel is personal but never private.

Our service of worship is structured to remind us of all of that substance. We do what we do in worship to draw a boundary around our faith that stands in contrast to the worldly chaos swirling around us. Our particular way of worshipping is an identity marker, something that proclaims

who we are. And, our particular way of worshipping is also something that reminds us **whose** we are.

Now, I know that the parallel between ritual Jewish hand washing and a Presbyterian bulletin is a bit tenuous. But perhaps it does help us to get a glimpse of why this was a big deal to the Pharisees. It was a big deal to them that people who were Jewish were not acting Jewish. It was a big deal to them that the important markers of identity seemed to be fading in the background. It was a big deal to them that the disciples of this Jesus were not keeping the tradition.

But apparently, what was a big deal to the Pharisees was a big irritant to Jesus. Whoosh! Jesus immediately went on the offensive, accusing them of hypocrisy, telling them that they cared more about appearance and tradition than they did about faithfulness and justice. You have to wonder if the Pharisees just caught Jesus on a bad day. Maybe that boat ride over to Gennesaret had been a bit bumpy. Or, maybe he was tired of always being questioned about what he was doing and the company he kept.

Or maybe, just maybe, Jesus finally got fed up with the fact that although sick people were being healed; demons were being exorcised; the oppressed were finally seeing visions of freedom; the deaf were starting to hear; the blind were beginning to see; God's kingdom was literally coming near... all that anybody wanted to talk about was the fact that his disciples had dirty hands! He had stepped off the boat in Gennesaret and people were being healed merely by touching the hem of his garment. And what did the keepers of **his** tradition, the Pharisees, want to talk about? How the disciples weren't following some of the rules.

Their tunnel vision seemed to grate on Jesus' last bit of patience. And so he decided that if they were going to tell him what they saw, he was going to tell them what he saw. And he saw a group of religious leaders who were starting to forget why they did what they did. He saw a group of religious leaders who were beginning to be more focused on outward actions rather than on inner attitudes.

He saw a group of religious leaders who were remembering to give lip service to their faith but forgetting to give themselves in loving service¹. He saw a group of religious leaders who were beginning to take themselves and their traditions more seriously than they were taking their God and God's ability to work a new thing. And it all added up to one big pile of kindling in Jesus, ready to flame with righteous indignation with just one more spark of Pharisaic disapproval. So when they asked that question about defiled hands--- Whoosh.

Now, unfortunately, we do not have record of the Pharisees' immediate reaction to this dressing-down by Jesus. We know what eventually happened—they sought to have him killed. But we do not know if on that day, they were stunned by his hot-tempered response or hurt by it. They might have felt a little of both. They might have been stunned because it was an honest question. And they might have been hurt because they **knew** that loving God with all their heart, mind, and strength was the centerpiece of their faith and not hand-washing. They just did not realize how much that identity marker of love was being eclipsed by the identity markers of rule-following.

It is a dangerous thing for any faith community. You have set traditions, set ways of doing things, set rituals that tell others who you are while reminding yourself whose you are. These important identity markers—whether it be ritual hand washing or the traditional Presbyterian order of worship—they can be crucial to the lifeblood of a congregation. They can be crucial to the formation of faith. But, if a faith community is not careful, all of those set traditions, those set ways of doing things, those set rituals always carry the potential to start subtly eclipsing the real centerpiece of faith and identity – the love of God and neighbor, and the trust that God is always doing a new thing.

And I have heard that sometimes in churches, before you know it, there might come a time when no one knows why you do a particular thing that particular way anymore, but everybody just knows that you have to do it that way or else. And a human tradition or ritual can become so much of the focus that the keepers of the tradition start to develop tunnel vision. And next thing you know, they stop noticing that sick people are being healed; demons are being exorcised; the oppressed are finally seeing visions of freedom; the deaf are starting to hear; the blind are beginning to see; God’s kingdom is literally coming near... because all that anybody wants to talk about is the fact that so-and-so is not following the rules and that is just not the way we do things around here.

In a month, after I leave, this congregation will begin the process of listening again for who God is calling you to be in this place called Woodhaven. You will begin the process of looking at **why** you do what you do. You will begin the process of discerning which rituals and which traditions give life to this place. You will focus on opening your collective eyes to God’s continuing work all around you.

And, at the same time, that also means that you will start to try and discern which rituals or which traditions might just need to be turned loose because they have the subtle danger of becoming idols and keeping you locked into the past. And as we heard this morning from the Pharisees’ perspective, this kind of discernment work can be a difficult process to undertake with honesty. Because it is always hard for us to turn loose of those people and those traditions that have helped feed our spirits, even if we know it is time.

But, that kind of wide vision, that kind of spiritual discernment, that kind of new life, are what God in Jesus calls us to do, not just in times of transition, but in all times and seasons of our lives. Because, goodness knows, we would never want to miss out on all that the Living Christ is doing in and among us simply because we did not think to lift our eyes off of each others’ slightly messy hands, muttering to ourselves about broken rules, not noticing that in the corner of our eye, someone is starting to dance while the kingdom of God comes near.

ⁱOrtberg, John. “Pharisees Are Us.” *Christian Century*, August 23, 2003. Page 20