

“Chill, Uptight Uprighteous!” - Mk 7:1-8,14-15,21-23 – Aug 30/09

Just a tad ‘testy’ toward the Pharisees, wasn’t he? Jesus, that is. With only one simple question from them about washing hands, Jesus gets right in their face, accusing them of being hypocrites. His rather snarly response might seem a bit “over the top” especially since from Mark’s introduction their question didn’t seem that big a deal. Mark even felt a need to explain to his readers why the question was asked, i.e. why the Pharisees would feel compelled to ask a question about Jesus’ disciples failing to wash their hands before they ate. That question, “Why do your disciples eat with defiled hands?” seems simple enough, particularly to anyone who might wonder why a minister, or an elder, or any other devout Christian could fail to say grace before a meal, and yet it provoked Jesus to respond with a rather aggressive answer.

We can only guess at what kind of answer those Pharisees were expecting, but I’m willing to bet that whatever they expected they didn’t get it in the reply from Jesus. We, like CNN, could speculate forever as to all sorts of mumbled replies Jesus might have made: they’re really hungry because we’ve been on the road all day; the host said ‘dig in’ before they had a chance; nobody showed them where the facilities are – I’m sure you could come up with a few good excuses yourself! But what did Jesus do? How did he respond to those religious nit-pickers? Jesus got right into their faces, not just challenging them but identifying them as the hypocrites against whom Isaiah prophesied. Jesus not only quoted scripture to accuse those who claimed to live by scripture; moreover he pointed to them as being the specific people against whom God had spoken through his prophet.

Wow! What inspired Jesus to jump on the Pharisees so quickly, and with both feet? (Of course that’s a rhetorical question – we know, we believe, we profess that it was God himself who inspired Jesus!) But why such an intense, such a passionate attack, telling these uptight uprighteous to chill?

The most likely answer to that question is that Jesus had a deep and abiding concern about how people, especially the ultra-religious Pharisees, had lost sight of, could no longer hear, the message of grace and reconciliation available from God. When he asserted to the assembled crowd that it is not what goes into your mouth that defiles you but what comes out, Jesus identified his concern over how people had lost track of God’s ultimate command to love one another. And when the disciples still didn’t get it, Jesus explained to them in great detail the very kind of things that defile a person within their hearts. Jesus spelled out in great detail to his closest followers that it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come, and he even listed a few examples. This is a definite challenge to those who believe that human nature is essentially good, and needs only to be released to do good. It is also a definite challenge to those who believe that acting righteous is sufficient.

It’s easy to dismiss the Pharisees. It’s easy to write them off as being some long-ago, far-away religious zealots from a different time and place. It’s even easy to dismiss those people in the early church to whom Mark wanted to make clear that a resurgence of Pharisaic misplaced zeal for religious observances was in contrast to what Jesus’ asked of those who would follow him. Unfortunately it’s even easy to dismiss those people in the Christian faith today who still believe that the rules are more important than the grace. It’s easy to dismiss all of them, but it’s wrong. We need to understand why people choose rules over grace; to understand why people stop at the Ten Commandments, and fail to hear that Jesus explicitly gave us a new one. We need to understand how otherwise intelligent people can latch on to a set of observances that cause discrimination, that cause rejection, that cause such pain to others in God’s kingdom. We need to probe, to dig, to ask, to find the root reasons why people will hide behind elaborate displays of faithfulness, and rigid reactions to all of life’s complex situations. We need to understand why they do so, in order that we can understand why we do the same thing.

I believe that the root cause of such legalistic behaviour is fear. Fear that somehow failing to observe even the teensiest rule will result in being rejected by God (and what does that say about that kind of faith?). Fear that committing an unwilling or even an unrecognized sin will be the trigger that causes the door to the kingdom to slam shut in their face. Fear that if God will barely accept me, how on earth could he accept you?

To be sure, there are many, many faithful Christians who live their lives in response to God's love in Christ in quiet service to their Lord, and their very lives are an example of goodness. But there are also many, many faithful Christians who miss the fact that 'pride' is included in Jesus' list of nasty things in the hearts of humans right along with 'theft', 'murder', 'adultery' and 'fornication'. Pride in never missing church. Pride in being able to be the fastest to find the page in the bible. Pride in displaying a bible that is more well-worn and floppy than anyone else's. Pride in never failing to say grace before a meal. Pride in being noticed blessing a Happy Meal at McDonalds. Pride in never eating with defiled hands.

But behind the pride is the engine of fear. Fear of being rejected at the gates of God's heavenly kingdom. Fear of hearing, "you didn't pray fervently enough." Fear of hearing, "you didn't participate in enough bible studies." Fear of hearing, "you dressed funny one day for church." Fear of hearing, "you didn't keep a smile on your face." Fear of hearing, "you read the wrong kind of book." Fear of hearing, "you're not faithful enough to enter my kingdom." These fears are the driving force behind Pharisaic, legalistic behaviour in Jesus' day, in Mark's day, in our day.

To quote Jesus, and his impassioned declaration: "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. ... It is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come ... from within, and they defile a person." It's becoming clearer to me that the ultimate outcome of that defiling is what I now call "the sin of the sense of self-entitlement." I know, that's an awkward name, and maybe I can come up with something catchier, but it does describe a phenomenon that I see as the opposite of generosity, of grace. There are some basic things that I do believe people are entitled to, such as the foundational human rights of being treated with dignity as a human being. But whenever people start to insist that they 'deserve' such things as salvation from God because they have obeyed all the rules, then they have moved into the sphere that triggered Jesus' accusations. And whenever people become unbearably self-righteous, carrying that sense of self-entitlement into the negative, as in claiming that others are NOT entitled to God's grace, mercy, and blessings, then they definitely have placed themselves as targets of Jesus' contention of being hypocrites.

So, if the heart is the source of evil intentions, where then does the good come from? Another rhetorical question, to be sure! God himself is the author of all that is good. The good comes from God's heart, in Christ. Jesus, the very Son of God, who proclaimed with all his heart a new covenant, a covenant of grace, a covenant of reconciliation with God, a promise of acceptance by God. It is no wonder that Jesus, full of the infinite love of God, full of compassion and caring for saint and sinner alike, full of tender mercy for the hungry, the naked, the poor, the homeless, the grieving, the lame, the blind, the leper, the foreigner, the woman, the child – it is no wonder at all that he challenged with such passion from within his own heart those who would attempt to curry favour with God through rigid, unbending, exclusivist and hurtful words and behaviours. It should be no surprise that Jesus, in offering himself so freely as a sacrifice that all who believed would find assurance of ultimately resting in God's heavenly kingdom, would expect the same kind of loving, all-embracing accepting by those who would follow in his name. It should be no surprise, but it seems to still be a surprise to many.

The difference, the key, the essence at the heart of it is what comes from the heart, whether the things of darkness attributed to the human heart, or God's love for his people. When we can accept

that we are loved so completely, so totally by God; when we can understand and believe that God's love was so complete that he sent his Son that we might have life and life abundant; when we can accept that we are accepted so completely by God, then our hearts will be so full of love, and joy, and life that all the other stuff is pushed out. Then what comes forth from our hearts will be that same grace, mercy, acceptance and love, and the whole world will know by our actions, inspired by love from the heart, that we are indeed followers of Christ. As the song puts it, "They will know that we are Christians, by our love." The world needs more of that kind of love. The Christian faith needs more of that kind of love. The Church needs more of that kind of love. The kind of love that would answer a little girl's prayer: "God, please make the bad people good, and the good people nice."

And so the answer should be clear, that if the heart is the natural source of evil intentions then the way to overcome those natural instincts is to fill our hearts with the love of God. By pouring into our hearts the love of God made manifest in Christ until they overflow with peace, patience, kindness, generosity, and above all love, pushing aside all of the natural nastiness that can lurk there. Replace the sense of self-entitlement with a sense of awe and gratitude for being blessed. Set aside any "I deserve" with "thank you." Fill yourself with the good things with which you are blessed - "It is not what goes into a person that defiles them," Jesus said. But first fill yourself with the bread of heaven, let your heart be filled to overflowing with the love, the compassion, the generosity, the caring, the grace of Christ. Come to his table, just as you are, and be filled with the abundant love and life that Jesus promised.