

What God Intends

The challenge of following Jesus isn't doing or believing. It's both.

A Homily by The Rev. Drew Downs
Proper 17B | Mark 7:1-23
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We have to go back nearly two months. Back in June, we were working our way through this gospel we call Mark. And the plot of the story is so far back we've no doubt lost it. So let's find it again, quickly.

When chapter 6 begins, Jesus is getting a lot of attention. He's been a part of some big, high-profile healings and everyone was talking. People were hanging on every word and action, scrambling to get close to him.

Back Home

Except for back home. When he went home, they couldn't hear his words because they wouldn't listen. They wouldn't believe that Mary and Joseph's son could possibly be so connected to God.

Sending Out

From there, this place of unbelief, Jesus gives his power to the disciples. He tells them to go out into the world, healing and proclaiming. Then come back.

Herod

And while they're gone, we get this strange interlude about Herod. Word of the healings has come to him. None of it makes sense. It sounds like John the Baptizer, but he's dead. Herod killed him. Is it a ghost?

Feeding

When the disciples get back, they tell Jesus everything. They healed and taught just like Jesus! But clearly, they're exhausted. So he tries to take them away to get a break. But the crowds won't let them. Jesus feels such sympathy for

them that he feeds all of them, miraculously from so little: a couple fish and some bread.

Believe

Then Jesus sends the disciples away by boat and he climbs a mountain to pray. Of course, the people try to follow them. Jesus comes, walking on the water, and like Herod, the disciples think it must be a ghost. Which means they still don't fully comprehend what Jesus is teaching them.

Now, on the other side, the mob has found them. And as chapter 7 begins, the first skeptics come to interrogate Jesus about his teaching.

Wash Those Hands!

We notice first that they're Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem. They've traveled from the city to get their eyes on Jesus. And the first thing they notice is that his disciples didn't wash up before they ate. And they are horrified.

So what's the big deal? Why are they horrified?

Well, we know it's not because it's gross, but because it's against the rules. And this the moment things begin to change.

It's not about bacteria.

Remember that for the Hebrew people there are two types of clean. There's the clean we know, which is washing up with soap and water. And then there's the other kind — the ritual kind. One is about physical cleaning and the other is about spiritual cleaning.

And, at the same time, we also remember that establishing ritual purity is not hard. It's actually a lot like washing your hands. It's not like you've committed some grave sin. It means you touched

something you shouldn't, so you wash up and you're good.

But the Pharisees and Scribes have taken to making *the maintenance* of ritual purity essential. And this breeds division like rotting apples brings fruit flies.

So there a few things at work when Jesus responds to the confrontation. It isn't just about the practice. It isn't just *did-they/didn't-they*. It's more than that.

It's about the junk going on inside of us; the implicit bias, the hypocrisy, and our willful flaunting of God's dream for us. We can be all pious on the outside and full of hate on the inside.

We can say and do the right things and be a total mess on the inside. But is that *good*? Is that being *honest*?

We Leak Bad Stuff

But that isn't even really the problem in and of itself. The problem is that all this junk inside us will get out. No matter how much we try to keep it in.

So if ritual and spiritual purity were really **only** about keeping bad stuff out, then I don't see Jesus making any kind of deal. He actually keeps a pretty tight ship.

And yet they **assume** Jesus doesn't actually *obey* the rules, so they call him on it. The Pharisees confront Jesus to enforce the rules and Jesus confronts them by saying it isn't just the rules. This whole system we've constructed to please God is broken.

So he makes two points.

1) They care more about the rule than the point of the rule.

2) They selectively enforce other rules to intentionally break the real point of them. In other words, they use loopholes to disobey God.

Jesus is saying that it isn't about bacteria getting into us. It's the corruption we're imposing on others. The two are linked.

Like Racism

Take the difference between the common cultural understanding of racism and how it's actually defined by social scientists. We often talk about racism like it's a belief. Something embedded in our bones or in our minds. So racism has to be *intentional* for it to be called racist.

But for social scientists, it is both:

Racial animus + systemic oppression = racism

The problem of racism isn't just what's inside or some terrible intent. It's that bad things happen to some minorities and some in the majority benefit from it. So we all keep the oppressed oppressed.

Racism is one of the things that defile us. Not just because it stirs up stuff within us, but because it comes out of us and hurts other people. And not just any people. The more vulnerable members of the population. Our neighbors behind us in the cultural line and ahead of us in the Kin-dom of God line.

Like Stealing

Jesus uses another example that we need to hear. In the section the lectionary skips over, Jesus talks about Corban. This is the practice of declaring something to give to the glory of God. Sounds great!

Except it was the scribes who had figured out that you could declare some of your money as Corban so you wouldn't have to use it to take care of your elderly parents! Oh, and the kicker! They would never actually donate the money to the Temple.

In other words, tax evasion had become a common practice among the Jerusalem elite to avoid responsibility. They just keep it in the Caymans.

So Jesus simply points out that this practice *they created* breaks one of the 10 Commandments. And they encourage others to break this

commandment for their selfish gain at the expense of their elderly parents. They find the loophole and elude the rule to intentionally avoid the intention of the rule.

And more specifically, they are avoiding human rules written to advance God's rules.

Jesus is calling out their hypocrisy for what it is: thievery. It's stealing and dishonest. It's abdicating responsibility and refusing to do what God is calling all of us to do.

What We'll Find

For us, this isn't about the inside evil alone. This isn't the laundry list at the end of what defiles or pointing out the racists in our midst. This isn't a justification for our call-out culture or Jesus taking the low road of calling out the people calling out. All that is noise which distracts us and distorts Jesus's teaching.

Jesus's point is that we must dig down until we find the point. The point of commands, rules, the very will of God. To ask ourselves *What is this about?* We do this to find what God *really* wants.

And what we find is not that we're all evil people destined to hurt each other. But that God's love for us sometimes comes in rules which challenge us and convict us. It comes in wrestling over and over with what it means to honor the Sabbath and keep it holy. What it means to honor our fathers and mothers. When we're children and when we're adults.

This stuff isn't always easy! But focusing on God's intention makes it all make more sense!

Tough Stuff

And of course, we'll find the list of shall-nots along the way. We shall not kill or steal from each other. And that also means we shall not extort, enslave, and oppress each other.

But...

We'll find how God's dream for us frees us from the zero-sum thinking and fears of losing out. The

dream opens our world to community and generosity and hope.

And our learning about this dream from Jesus, in coming to believe in this mission of God's to transform the world will change us. All the way down. The Spirit will root out the cancers which corrupt our thinking, our acting, and our governing each other.

This is what Jesus is trying to show us in the bread. Not that we're totally good or totally bad or bound to the capricious enforcement of laws by the powerful. But that God's kin-dom is nothing like that.

Nothing like that at all.

But to find out what it is, we have to keep walking, keep following, not on the high road, but the hard road.

Like Peter, we follow the one who knows the way.