

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

August 29, 2021 (Proper 17, Year B)
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
James 1:17-27

There's a story about a couple who had a friend who was a bachelor. They had him over to eat quite often, and one day he invited them over for a meal. The wife was a little concerned, but she didn't say anything.

When they arrived at his house, it was truly the home of a bachelor. There were clothes lying around all over the place and stacks of things here and there. It hadn't been dusted for some time, and his 2 big dogs were lying on the couch.

They sat down at the table, and the wife saw something she had to ask about. She said, "Are these plates clean? They seem to have a kind of film on them."

Their friend said, "They're just as clean as Soap 'n Water can get them."

The wife didn't want offend the friend so she let it pass, but just then the dogs came into the dining room and jumped up on her with their front paws on her shoulders.

Their friend quickly yelled, "Soap 'n Water, get down!"

I know what Jesus says, but I hope that I NEVER see these verses hanging in a restaurant. I WANT those food-handlers to wash their hands before touching my food.

There are GOOD REASONS we use REAL soap and water, like basic sanitation and hygiene. But that's NOT the kind of washing the PHARISEES were talking about. The washing of hands in THESE verses wasn't just to clean off the dirt, but a CEREMONIAL or ritual washing. The hands not only needed to be cleaned, they also needed to be purified – made holy again.

The ritual hand washing was meant to invite God into all aspects of life and bring people closer to God, you know, like our practices of removing your hat for a prayer or dressing nicely for church. The INTENTION was GOOD, but it had become an END in itself, so that if you DIDN'T do it, you were judged; it somehow meant you were NOT close to God, not WORTHY. But Jesus recognizes the hypocrisy of that and he quotes from Isaiah, "These people honor me with their lips but their HEARTS are far from me."

Queen Victoria was once at a diplomatic reception in London. The guest of honor was an African chieftain. All went well during the meal until, at the end, finger bowls were served. Finger bowls are small bowls filled with water for rinsing your fingers at the end of a meal. The African chieftain had never seen a British finger bowl, and no one had thought to tell him beforehand what it was for. So he took the finger bowl in both his hands, lifted it, and drank it – down to the last drop!

For a moment there was breathless silence among the British upper crust and then they began to whisper and murmur. But all that stopped when Queen Victoria silently took HER finger bowl in her hands and drank hers! A moment later 500 surprised British ladies and gentlemen simultaneously drank from their OWN fingerbowls.

It was "against the rules," but on that particular evening Victoria CHANGED the rules – because, after all, she WAS the Queen. Rules and traditions, written and unwritten, usually have good intentions. But, like everything else, they can be taken too far.

I once served a church that had a real problem in the kitchen. The older generation of church basement ladies had a CERTAIN way of doing things and a certain PLACE for everything. They never bothered to tell anyone OUTSIDE their circle what those ways and places were, because after all, THEY knew. They lamented that none of the younger women of the church ever HELPED in the kitchen, but when I asked the younger women about it, well, you can guess what they said. At some point, they had TRIED to help, but inevitably they'd done something wrong, something differently, and the VENOMOUS WRATH that came down on them had driven them right out, never to return. You'd

think that God Himself had ordained that the coffee be scooped with one CERTAIN cup, and the lefsa be mixed one CERTAIN way. In the words of James, "If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues...their religion is worthless."

How many people have been driven from the CHURCH because of careless words? Rules and traditions can get in the way of community or, worse, get in the way of COMPASSION. We follow the LETTER of the law and forget the SPIRIT of the law.

Sixties British rock star Cliff Richard became a devout believer and disciple of Jesus. Back in the '70s, he visited missionary outposts in the Sudan and refugee camps in Bangladesh as part of a mission trip. In his book about his conversion to Christianity, he writes: "The first morning, I must have washed my hands a dozen times. Whenever we stopped, I made a beeline for the communal tap or the well; I didn't want to touch anything, least of all the people. Everyone in those camps, even the babies, was covered in sores and scabs.

"I was bending down to one little mite, mainly for the photographer's benefit, and trying hard not to have too close a contact, when someone accidentally stood on the child's fingers. He screamed out, and as a reflex, I grabbed hold of him, forgetting all about his dirt and his sores. I remember now that warm little body clinging to me, and the crying instantly stopped. In that moment, I knew I had an ENORMOUS amount to learn about practical Christian LOVING, but at least I'd started."

James says, "Be DOERS of the word, and not merely hearers." But KNOW that doing RELIGIOUS THINGS can't SUBSTITUTE for words and actions that COME from a faithful heart, SPONTANEOUSLY, like picking up and holding a crying child. That's what this gospel story comes down to. Which is more important – what's outside or what's INSIDE? Our OUTSIDE behavior or our INSIDE motivation? God has already DONE everything needed for your salvation, so God is REALLY only concerned with what's in your heart. If your HEART is in the right place, the ACTIONS will FOLLOW.

James says that every generous act of giving, and every perfect gift, is FROM GOD. I heard of a priest that, every time he meets somebody, INTENTIONALLY thinks to himself, "I honor my LORD who lives INSIDE you." He finds that, when he THINKS that way, he FEELS differently about that person, and TREATS them differently. It's a BLESSING and a GIFT to SEE people like that, to see the WORLD like that. "I honor my LORD who lives INSIDE you."

God offers that gift to YOU, accepts YOU just as you are, so that YOU can give that gift to others.

So be DOERS of the word and not just hearers; follow the SPIRIT and the HEART of the law, instead of the LETTER of the law, become the first-fruits of God's love. When you look at the person sitting next to you, or the person helping in the kitchen, or the NEW people you see in town, or our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, or yes, even a person you DISAGREE with, you can either JUDGE that person for what you see OUTSIDE, or HONOR them for what's on the INSIDE. You know what GOD sees, because he sees it in YOU. "I honor my LORD who lives INSIDE you." Amen.