

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

September 1, 2024 (Proper 17, Year B)
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
James 1:17-27

One Sunday morning an old cowboy entered a church just before the service began. Although the old man and his clothes were spotless, he was wearing jeans, a denim shirt and boots that were worn and ragged. In his hand he carried a worn-out old hat and an equally worn-out Bible.

The church he went to was in an upscale and exclusive part of the city. It was the largest and most beautiful church the old cowboy had ever seen. The people of the congregation were all dressed with expensive clothes and accessories. As the cowboy took a seat, the others moved AWAY from him. No one greeted him, spoke to him, or welcomed him. They were all APPALLED at his appearance, and they didn't even ATTEMPT to HIDE it.

After the service, as the old cowboy was leaving the church, the preacher approached him and asked the cowboy to do him a favor. He said, "Before you come back in here again, have a talk with God, and ask him what HE thinks would be appropriate ATTIRE for worship."

The old cowboy assured the preacher he would. The next Sunday, he showed up AGAIN for the service wearing the SAME ragged jeans, shirt, boots, and hat. Once again, he was completely shunned and ignored. The preacher approached the man and said, "I thought I asked you to speak to God before you came back to our church."

"I did," replied the old cowboy.

"If you spoke to God, what did he tell you the proper ATTIRE should be for worshipping here?" asked the preacher.

"Well, sir, God told me that He didn't have a clue what I should wear here. He said He'd never BEEN in this church before."

You don't mess with an old cowboy. He'll tell you truth, and call you a hypocrite, right to your face.

That's what happens in our Gospel reading today. Pharisees and teachers have come down from Jerusalem and are gathered around Jesus watching the disciples. They were LOOKING for something to criticize, and it didn't take the Pharisees long to FIND something. Critics ALWAYS find SOMETHING to complain about.

The disciples are eating lunch. They'd come in from the day's work too tired and too hungry to care that their hands and faces were dirty. They just sat down to eat without washing.

The Pharisees seize upon this and question Jesus: "Why don't your disciples live according to the traditions of the elders and clean their hands before they eat?"

This is all that Jesus needs to hear. He sticks up for his disciples and says, in EFFECT, "You hypocrites. Why don't you live according to the traditions of GOD and clean your HEARTS instead?"

Now, 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.

This ritual was meant to bring people closer to God, you know, like dressing nicely for church. But, like that church the old cowboy visited, it had become an END in itself, so that if you DIDN'T do it, 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."

I'm sure you've noticed that Catholics bow when they're in church. They bow a lot. Years ago, Harry Emerson Fosdick told about a Catholic church in Denmark, where the worshipers BOWED FAITHFULLY before a CERTAIN SPOT on the WALL. They'd been doing that for THREE

CENTURIES -- bowing at that ONE spot in the sanctuary. Nobody could remember why. One day, in renovating the church, they removed some of the whitewash on the walls, and at the exact spot where the people bowed, they found the image of the Madonna under the whitewash. People had become so ACCUSTOMED to bowing before that image, in THAT SPOT, that even after it had been COVERED, people STILL bowed there. And that had gone on for GENERATIONS, for HUNDREDS of years.

Rules and traditions, written and unwritten, usually START with GOOD intentions. But, like everything else, they can be TAKEN TOO far.

Two monks, an experienced monk named Tanzan, and a younger monk, were walking down a muddy street in the city. They came upon a lovely young girl dressed in fine silks, who was afraid to cross because of all the mud.

"Come on, girl," said Tanzan. And he picked her up in his arms, and carried her across the street.

The two monks didn't speak AGAIN till nightfall. Then, when they'd returned to the monastery, the young monk couldn't keep quiet any longer. "Monks are not supposed to go near young girls," he said. "Certainly not beautiful ones like that one! Why did you do that?"

"My dear fellow," said Tanzan. "I put that girl down back in the city. It's YOU who are still carrying her."

It's called traditional-ISM. Jaroslav Pelikan defined the difference. He said, "TRADITION is the LIVING faith of the dead, traditional-ISM is the DEAD faith of the LIVING."

Tradition is beautiful and powerful, but traditional-ISM, SUCKS the LIFE RIGHT OUT of the church. It rears its ugly head in many ways.

The Pharisees had learned to SUBSTITUTE tradition and custom for the PRESENCE of the LIVING GOD. The action was taking the PLACE of God. And what's worse, traditional-ISM uses the NAME of God to SEPARATE us from each other, which is the very OPPOSITE of God's will for us.

How many people have been DRIVEN from the CHURCH because of careless words? We at First may point the finger at OTHER churches for how they treat couples who live together before marriage or have gotten a divorce, or people who are STRUGGLING in some way, but we aren't IMMUNE to PETTINESS. As hard as we have worked to be an open and inclusive community, it happens HERE too. There are people in this community that won't step FOOT into this church again, because they heard of some unkind word that was said to someone. They took it personally, because THAT criticism described THEM TOO. How does driving people AWAY from the church FURTHER God's kingdom? The letter to James says, "If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues...their religion is worthless."

Rules and traditions, taken TOO FAR, can get in the way of COMMUNITY or, worse, get in the way of COMPASSION. We can follow the LETTER of the law and forget the SPIRIT of the law.

James says, "Be DOERS of the word and not merely hearers." But just DOING RELIGIOUS THINGS can't SUBSTITUTE for words and actions that come from a FAITHFUL HEART, spontaneously, like picking up a crying child and holding them.

That's what this gospel story comes down to. Which is more important – what's outside or what's INSIDE? Our OUTSIDE appearance or our INSIDE motivation? God has already DONE EVERYTHING NEEDED for your salvation, so God is only REALLY concerned with what's in your HEART. And if your HEART is in the right place, the actions will follow.

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

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 people you see around town, or even our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, or yes, EVEN someone who VOTES differently than you, you can either JUDGE that person for what you see on the OUTSIDE, whether they live up to YOUR STANDARDS, OR you can HONOR them for what's on the INSIDE. Jesus lives inside THEM TOO.

You KNOW what GOD sees, because he sees it in YOU. "I honor my LORD who lives INSIDE you." Amen.