

**Sermon Preached by The Reverend Jonathon W. Jensen, Rector  
Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
on the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 17, Year B  
August 30, 2015**

Mark 7

Bless us O Lord and these thy gifts we are about to receive from thy bounty, and keep us ever mindful of the needs of others, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

That's not the right prayer, is it? That is a traditional and common blessing before a meal. Each time we gather for worship, one of the clergy offers a prayer to focus our intention. Last week, I had the sacred task of calling us to be mindful as we gathered as a community. With vigor and reverence, I *unintentionally* started right in with *that* prayer before meals.

One thing I have learned about public speaking is – if you mess up, keep going like you meant to say that and most people won't even notice. T.J., however, looked on with a quizzical yet graceful gaze. About 1/3 of the way through, I realized my mistake but carried on. God cares more about the intention than the action. On reflection, I realized that prayer actually works perfectly before worship together as a way to keep us mindful of what is most important.

Bless us O Lord and these thy gifts we are about to receive from thy bounty, and keep us ever mindful of the needs of others, through Christ our Lord. Amen. It prepares us for what we do each week. We receive the gifts of bread and wine in the eucharist as a way of taking Christ into ourselves so we might be transformed from the inside out. We sing and pray together as a community. We hear our place in the story of Scripture. We are reoriented, not to ourselves, but to God and our neighbors. That simple grace before meals brought all that into focus.

More importantly, on that occasion, that prayer had the precise effect it is supposed to have. It called us to the heart of what we are doing together – being transformed by Christ from the inside out to serve God and our neighbors in the world. The unexpected prayer refocused, recalibrated, reoriented us. The particular form didn't matter as much as the intention to be mindful in the moment with the holy. The prayer poked awake consciousness.

That is what Jesus is trying to elicit in this story from Mark. Jesus had been teaching, healing, and being with all sorts of people. He had gained a good reputation and was attracting followers from all walks of life. The establishment of religion, money, and politics had little time for him. Ordinary men and women had begun to wake up and take notice.

On first glance, this gospel sounds like an internal family drama or insider church politics. It's hard to get the cultural nuances of this story. The gospel writer, Mark, even tries to explain a bit of background. His audience of Gentiles, non-Jewish people, would not have understood the details either. But examined a little more closely, the particulars of context are different but the basic situation still happens today.

A group of Pharisees had come from the big, capital city of Jerusalem, to see what this man Jesus was about. They were a party of religious leaders who followed the traditions of the Hebrew

Bible, sometimes called the Old Testament. Those teachings defined the relationship between God and the people and relationships among the people.

The Pharisees, which in Hebrew means “set apart,” were the interpreters of the religious law for the spiritual health of the people. On a historical note, after the fall of the Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70AD, the Pharisees became the dominant religious party and the forerunners of modern day Judaism. They were not bad in themselves, but in any age in any place, when the ones with power have their authority challenged – they take notice. People were starting to listen to *Jesus*, rather than the Pharisees, so something had to be done.

And so our scene today. The Pharisees noticed that *some* of Jesus’ followers did not wash their hands before eating. Their mothers would be so proud. Washing one’s hands, food, and cookware were all part of a highly developed system of religious laws of purity. These customs had less to do with physical health than spiritual well being. Specifically, this was part of a way to maintain ritual purity about who was in or out of right relationship with God and one another.

On the surface, the Pharisees ask what seems like an innocuous question about hand washing. The underlying question, the heart of the matter, – is Jesus observing the religious customs and maintaining right relationship with God or not? If Jesus was not observing ritual purity customs, the very laws the Pharisees interpreted, this was evidence to discredit him and his teachings and protect their hold on authority. The situation is not dissimilar to someone finding dirt on a politician and running an attack ad. “You may not like *us*, but you can’t trust *him*.”

Jesus responded to the Pharisees by quoting their own Bible back at them. It was meant to be a poke, a prod, a push – to awake consciousness and make them mindful of what matters. You say and do all the right things but your heart isn’t in it. For us and them, the heart was a symbol of the essence of a person. The problem was not in their beliefs but in their practice of them. You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition that *you* control. Love God and love your neighbor. That is the great commandment – to share the essence of who you are.

Then Jesus addressed the crowds who were observing this scene. All y’all, listen up. *They* are worried about your stomachs but I’m talking about your hearts. And that’s what God wants – you, all of you. Your specific behavior is less important than your motives and intent. Who are you trying to be? Wash your hands all you want. Follow all the rules. All the things that drive you away from God and your neighbor – he gives a big list – they come from within you. God wants not washed hands but a clean heart. Be transformed from the inside out. If you focus on all those customs, helpful as they may be, you will miss the point of them.

No one is becoming more pure from these purity laws. They may influence behavior but they don’t influence intention, motivation, and matters of the heart – and that is what really matters to God. These ritual purity laws or our *own* religious customs are just another form of a sign to help us along the right path. Don’t ever mistake the sign for the reality to which it points

Said another way, the finger pointing at the moon is not the moon. (x2) The laws meant to help our relationship with God, are not God. The people who interpret them are not God. You are not God. But the Lord is in the hands, washed or not, with which you serve your neighbor. God is in your heart, transforming you from the inside out.