

When Rites are Right

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

August 16, 2009

I.

One of the great things about the Bible is that many of its stories involve eating, or food, or something to do with meals. Last week we heard of the heavenly bread of life. Three weeks ago was the story of the feeding of the 5,000. Today, the Gospel was about whether the disciples washed their hands before they ate. And after today's service, whether we wash our hands or not, we all will gather for our annual parish picnic.

And I naturally am drawn to stories about food. When I was a kid growing up on the farm, I thought gravy was a beverage. And right away I'm reminded of the story of the fellow whose therapist told him that to find inner peace he always had to finish what he started. He finished a box of donuts and felt better right away.

Today's reading, however, only uses the setting of a meal to make a larger point. It raises the question of form over substance, of ritual over reality, of God's will over human traditions. And it shows Jesus' concerns about people worshipping with their heads, but not their hearts.

Jesus made some serious charges here. He told the Pharisees they were hypocrites for ignoring God's commandments and elevating their own rituals to holy status. What happened to cause Jesus to say such a thing?

II.

As we know, the Pharisees were Jewish religious leaders of the times who organized synagogues and led worship. They believed in a strict interpretation of the laws Moses received from God on Mt. Sinai centuries earlier.

But they also were protective of their power and authority, and over time had developed many additional rules and rituals designed to ensure their leadership role among the Jewish people. They set themselves up as enforcers of complicated requirements that they invented, and in this way exerted greater control within society.

When I was a lawyer I often encountered complex administrative regulations, ostensibly adopted to serve the law, that actually subverted the law and strengthened the power of the bureaucrats.

The same thing happened with the Pharisees, which is why Jesus seemed to carry on a running battle with them in Scripture. He was not opposed to the Pharisees' role as religious leaders, and in fact supported it. But he took issue with their emphasis on religious technicalities at the expense of God's teachings.

III.

That was how the problem arose in today's Gospel reading. Jesus and his disciples were eating together, and some Pharisees showed up and demanded to know why the disciples had not first ritually washed their hands in accordance with the tradition of the elders.

And these traditions imposed detailed requirements about hand washing before meals that included specifications on the amount of water to be used, the number of times the hands were to be rinsed, and similar stipulations. But these practices were not commanded by Scripture.

I suppose I might have thought my mother was like the Pharisees, if I had known what they were back then. I had to wash my hands before coming to the table. But my mother was

interested in hygiene, not ritual. For the Pharisees it was the opposite. The disciples actually might have washed their hands before sitting down. But apparently they did not do it in the specific way required by the so called "elders. The rituals had not been observed.

And Jesus called the Pharisees up short for putting form over substance. He told them that fellowship with God is not lost because people have unclean hands, but rather because they have unclean hearts. And he told them their rituals and traditions had become more important than God's word, and had obscured the meaning of Scripture. They were obsessed with ceremonial traditions and treating them as God-given doctrines.

And it's important to note here that Jesus did not criticize rituals and traditions as such. Certainly the Jewish people over the centuries engaged in rituals, just as Christians in the early church did the same. And tradition has been one of the underpinnings of Anglican doctrine since the sixteenth century.

But problems develop when rituals become more important than faith. And Jesus underscored this in the last part of the reading when he said that disobedient conduct is evidenced by what people allow to come out of their hearts rather than by what they put into their mouths.

IV.

How does that message speak to us today? Even more directly, how does it speak to us as Episcopalians, with all of our ruffles and flourishes, and our vestments and robes, and our rituals and traditions that we are so hesitant to change?

In this respect, I am reminded of the question about how many Episcopalians it takes to change a light bulb. The answer is five; one to change the bulb, and four to stand around and reminisce about how good the old bulb was.

And perhaps some of my friends in other denominations might point to today's reading and suggest that the way we do things in the Episcopal Church takes after the Pharisees. That would be true if all we cared about was robes and vestments, and flowers on the altar, and soaring music, and church architecture, and rubrics in the prayer book.

But I would tell them there is a very good reason why we Episcopalians do what we do. I would explain that our worship offers God the very best we have. We make an effort to show that we are serious and treat our rituals as visible expressions of the reverence and awe in which we hold God and creation.

This goes back to the Old Testament. Centuries before the time of Christ Hebrew law required animals to be sacrificed to God, and only unblemished animals could be offered (e.g., Lev. 22:20). And the Book of Malachi proclaims that anyone who held back good stock and sacrificed a sick or lame animal would be cursed (1:8-14). From the beginning God expected our best.

In the same way the Episcopal tradition requires us to offer our best. We do not hold back, or treat our worship casually or as an afterthought. What we do here requires planning, effort, energy, and spiritual commitment. We willingly give ourselves in those ways. We utilize ritual and tradition and vestments and liturgy as part of our obligation to honor God, not as an opportunity to entertain ourselves.

But I would agree with my friends from other denominations that if any religious tradition becomes obsessed with ritual, then it is easy to forget about worshipping God in spirit and truth. And I also would agree that if ritual becomes an end in and of itself, rather than the means to the end, then faith can take the back seat.

This subject reminds me of the story about a Baptist preacher who was trying to get a fellow to start coming to church. The man said he didn't really have the right clothes, and so the preacher went out and got him a new suit. Still the fellow did not show up, and the preacher finally called and asked him about it. The fellow said, "Well, after I got dressed up, I thought I looked so good I went to the Episcopal Church."

Is that our image? Do people only come if they have the right clothes? I hope not. I hope we don't think that we can set the standards for who is acceptable to God. If we do that, we are merely modern-day Pharisees ourselves. And I don't believe we do that here at St. Thomas. I believe we see the church as a way to include everyone, not just select a few.

In today's reading Jesus saw through the rituals and traditions of the Pharisees, and recognized them for what they were. And today he asks us to do the same thing. We are called to look at our rituals, our traditions, and the ways in which we celebrate our liturgy. When we do the things we do in order to worship God, then our worship honors him. And I pray that we always can resist the temptation to think that we worship God just to serve ourselves.

V.

And so, when it's all said and done, what makes a church a church, or a religion a religion, is not determined by what is outside coming in, but rather what is inside and goes out. Church attendance and Bible studies and committee meetings and the like are important and necessary, provided they are the means to the end and not the end itself.

Christianity begins as a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and then it becomes a community of faith in which Christians come together as Christ's Body to minister to each other.

The Pharisees did the second part, they came together as a body. However, Jesus recognized that they neglected the first part, their relationship with God.

I recall the story of the fellow who went to the same church for fifty years. He was asked if he saw a lot of changes during that time, and he said, "Yes, and I opposed every one of them."

It is possible that gentleman was more concerned about tradition and ritual than about the church's mission to its members and its community. Or, on the other hand, perhaps he truly believed that he was a guardian of the faith against assaults from the outside.

The test in either event is in our hearts. The Gospel tells us that once our rituals become holy, then what truly is holy becomes forgotten. And we know that once the holy is forgotten, it will not be long before the spirit is corrupted and true worship no longer is possible.

So in this case, like in so many situations where good and evil contend for the souls of humanity, we turn to Scripture and the Holy Spirit. Through them we surrender ourselves to God. That is the ritual in which we find our strength and hope. Through it is our salvation. And with it we can turn away from those things that separate us from God, and genuinely worship God and be drawn to him. *Amen.*