

Family Arguments and Kindred Hearts

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

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Would you pray with me?

God, help our hearts to absorb your challenging words and let us be mindful of the feelings and thoughts we bring to the table today. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, oh our rock and our redeemer.

Why am I drinking coffee while wearing a flannel and camo hat? No, this isn't the red-green show gone wrong, but you will need to wait for your answer. First, a story.

Years ago, I led a tight knit group of high school students on a wilderness trip in the BWCA. It was a fabulous week; sun-bleached days of swimming, the mosquitos were few and far between, spirits ran high, and the weather was perfect. We were like a family journeying through the wilderness, reading scripture, helping each other carry all our gear over portages and set up tents, cook, and clean the dishes.

Until the last day.

The group had collaborated so well, we planned a rather rigorous last day. This meant a lengthy day of portaging and paddling. Just as the canoes were loaded: the wind picked up and a line of storm clouds formed. We then spent the entire day paddling and portaging in heavy downpours with white caps. Now, I was a novice leader, and concerns were running high- especially with my other adult, Rebecca. Rebecca was rebuilding her life after a divorce and challenging herself to do new and difficult things- she is honestly an amazing human being. But, like a bad movie, we decided to split up and I went ahead and set up lunch where we ate wet crackers surrounded by thunder. I look back and think “What was I thinking splitting up? Why did we camp so far from the take-out?”

(shaking my head).

Anyway, after all was said and done, we arrived at Sawbill outfitters, dragged our boats on shore, soaked and muddy, and my co-leader says “Well, do you want me to go get the van or will you?”

“Why?” I asked fingers numb rain pelting on my face.

“So, we don’t have to portage everything an eight mile down a muddy road to the outfitters” she said with a dogged face and some tight lips.

I thought for a minute, then responded. “Rebecca, we really have to finish the trip and carry our things because if we get the van muddy, we have to ride home in the mud.”

My response flabbergasted everyone, and I clearly remember Rebecca's look turn to a squinting gaze "Can't you see we are all done? We ARE DONE! You are such a typical man, PUSH IT TO THE VERY END." She hefted a bag on her back and stormed off.

"Typical man?" I thought to myself shivering and soaked to the bone "Golly maybe we should hail you a cab!"

Our scripture today is much like this moment: it feels like walking in on a family argument that is so painful and uncomfortable to witness, you'd probably choose to avoid being present. And while it's easy to dismiss the in-house disagreements between Jesus and the scribes and pharisees as irrelevant and embarrassing, Jesus loved them, he was Jewish. They were part of his family of faith. To avoid this disagreement would mean missing out on Jesus familial call to renew the inner workings of our hearts.

Just as in the Judaism of Christs time, Christianity runs the risk of becoming too caught up on our practices, becoming so hyper focused on of the particulars, that we no longer behold the awesome presence of the living Christ or embody the very virtues we seek to name as life-giving, life rescuing, life-restoring.

One theologian says:

It would appear that this passage is a critique of how we as religious creatures too often exalt our rituals above our ethics. Enamored with the religiously superior identity that we gain through this participation in

community's ritual symbolism, we get hung up on religious set-apartness, overlooking the deeper truth that living out the heart of our religious tradition call us to... kindness over cruelty, compassion over condemnation." – Loye Bradley Ashton

There is tension between religious practice and the ability to accept, deepen, and live out the wonderful mysterious of the Spirit and the alternate kingdom the Jesus sought to teach through scripture. From pre-Jesus to post-apocalyptic imagery there is a consistent prophetic voice pointing to how incapable we can be to hear, embrace, and exalt the beautiful voice of God speaking in our midst.

Wanna know a secret? Pastors do this. Consider the act of giving and receiving communion. If you have never worked with multiple pastors who go through lengthy closed-door deliberations, weigh out, exegete, sometimes litigate the most minute details of how communion happens in worship- oh boy, you are missing out!

As my mother says, who by the way is preaching today in Champaign IL (You Rock Mom!) "If you want to make worship planning way too much work and effort -ask a protestant pastor to get involved. Our need to "be precise" requires all the time and energy you're willing to give!"

Amos says:

*I hate, I spurn your feasts, I take no pleasure in your solemnities;
Your cereal offerings I will not accept, nor consider your stall-fed peace*

offerings.

Away with your noisy songs! I will not listen to the melodies of your harps. But if you would offer me holocausts, then let justice surge like water, and goodness like an unfailing stream. (Amos 5:21-24)

There is a beautiful painting that captures much of the Spirit of this text hanging in the Brooklyn Museum. James Tissot from the sleepy and picturesque town of Chenecy-Buillon, France, painted this around 1900. I invite you to open your bulletin to page ____ and look at it now.

Our artist, Tissot captures the moment well; Jesus is in the middle of the town square with life unfolding around him. The streets are being cleaned. People sit in other circles oblivious to his presence. There are onlookers with hands wringing and mouths covered as Jesus speaks to the civic elite. The disciples sit piously, at Jesus feet, looking concerned as Jesus shares harsh words with the elderly, learned religiously connected and powerful. The pharisees, gilded in beautiful clothing, all stand each having an expression of disdain. I imagine them thinking to themselves:

“Why do you sit at his feet?” you can imagine one saying palms outstretched staring at the disciples.

“Who are you to speak to me like this? Do you not honor religious commitments?” Says another perhaps offended and defiant.

“Who does this guy think he is? What a joke” you can see in the condescending smile of another.

But one thing that really stands out is that everyone, all the onlookers, those that pay attention, those that disparage, those left in wonder- they all share one thing in common. All have head coverings. Only Jesus fully reveals his full face as if he alone is willing to fully reveal himself, expose his truth, and divulge his presence. Perhaps this also is how Tissot, remained true to a scripture where Christ teaches the importance of total honesty with God- modeling a head and a heart kindred with the divine.

This was just another moment where Tissot imagined Jesus causing outrage- because it was outrageous not to cover your head in public. Head coverings were a Judaic custom meant to evidence humility before God and modesty before others. Tissot's Christ was acting so irreverently, so upsettingly, that people's hearts were unprepared for his grace filled words.

One person says this:

Our challenge today is to recognize how we, like the pharisees, misinterpret what is important to God. Do we look at the dirty fingernails of our homeless brothers and sisters and think to ourselves, "They do not belong in our sanctuary?" Do we hear a baby crying during the worship service and think to ourselves, or even whisper to our neighbor, "Children should not be allowed in worship.?" We seem to put a lot of energy into keeping people out of our sanctuaries, rather than examining the sins that stain our own lives. – Amy C. Howe.

Now, did you wonder why I am in a flannel with a camo hat and flask of coffee? Did, if even for a moment, you feel that it is irreverent for a pastor wear a head covering while in church? Did you, somewhere in the quiet, feel let down by my casual appearance?

We all make judgements- and judgements come from the heart, from our beliefs, from our values., from deeply held practices. Some honor God, some do not. But we all struggle with hearts ready to exchange the living Christ for the safety of polite, socially acceptable practices. For Jesus says:

“Listen to me, all of you, and understand, there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. For it is from the human heart that evil intentions come and can defile a person.”

Our scripture asks us to reflect upon the purposes of our religious practices, not only in dress, but in worship, in public demeanor, in our own vulnerability. Our scripture challenges our ability to witness the Living Christ in the living world, to see and hear and wonder with him in places of beauty and joy, and of ugliness and sin. I think the Good News for each of us that Christ's words hold hope. For we can renew our attitudes and actions such that we can reflect back the immense love and Grace that is We can become kindred hearts, united in the resurrected Christ.

Hearts purified in the refiner's fire.

And maybe you are thinking: Humph. Jesus is being such a demanding savior: pushing us to grow to the very end with no breaks. No head covering! What an annoyance! His words sound like an indictment; who does he think he is?

Just remember next time you think these things: pause, breath, look hard, listen closely, for Christ stands uncovered in your midst.

God is never done with us.

Amen.