

“Rules, Rules, Rules”
February 16, 2020
St. Paul’s UCC Church
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Mark 7:1-2, 5-8, 14-15, 21-23

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

‘This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’
You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “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 within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.

SONG: “Lord, I Want to Be a Christian in My Heart” (v. 1)

One: Jesus really has it in for the hypocrites in our Scripture reading this morning! In the seventh chapter of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus takes the Pharisees out behind the woodshed.

Two: Jesus puts those Pharisees in their place!

Three: Well... they started it.

Four: That’s true. Remember, the Pharisees are the religious teachers of the day. They interpret the laws of God and tell the people how they ought to live. And in Mark’s Gospel, the Pharisees are kind of like the Theological Health Department. They like to show up unannounced for surprise inspections.

Five: Today, those pesky Pharisees have come down from Jerusalem to check Jesus out, to look him over, and make sure he is dotting his “i”s and crossing his “t”s and following all the rules. And Jesus fails the inspection. Turns out, his disciples are eating without washing their hands.

ALL: EWWW!

Six: Yes, I know what you are thinking: gross, right? Why *shouldn't* the disciples wash their hands? Well, we need to understand that this story is not actually about hygiene. The disciples are not Taco Bell employees who failed to follow the "employees must wash hands" sign in the bathroom.

Seven: Right. Hygiene is not the real issue here; religious and ritual purity is. For reasons way too complicated to go into now, the Pharisees believed that you had to ritually wash your hands before every meal in order to avoid being defiled. It was a kosher thing.

Eight: The Pharisees had lots of rules like that.

Nine: Lots and lots of rules.

Ten: Well, today, the disciples are eating with unwashed hands, and the Pharisees call Jesus on it.

Eleven: But Jesus is a little short-tempered at that moment, a little grumpy. And he ends up preaching a sermon against the Pharisees... right there in front of them!

Twelve: Good old Jesus. Sticking it to the hypocrites; standing up for the little guy. It's so nice to see those no good rotten Pharisees getting what they deserve...!

SONG: "Lord, I Want to Be More Holy in My Heart" (v. 2)

Thirteen: There is just one little thing that bothers me about this story... What if we are the Pharisees? What if Jesus is talking about *us*?

Fourteen: Yeah, where do we fit in this story? Which part do we play? Which characters are we most like?

Fifteen: Well, there are only three characters. First of all, there is Jesus. I think it is safe to say that we are not him (If anybody here *does* think that you are Jesus, please see Pastor Mary Beth and the deacons after church so that they can lay on hands and pray for you).

Sixteen: There is also "the crowd." In Mark's Gospel, the crowd is usually people on the bottom rung of the social ladder: peasants, homeless people, day-laborers and the working poor. Probably most of us do not belong in that crowd.

Eighteen: So that leaves us with the Pharisees. Could we be... them?

Nineteen: 2000 years of Christian tradition has taught us to see the Pharisees as villains and scoundrels and bad guys. But they were not always seen that way. In Jesus' own day—in this story—the Pharisees are actually the good people. Church-going. Bible-studying. God-fearing. Decent. Respectable. People like us. If we are in this story at all, we are the Pharisees.

Twenty: But wait, you'll say: We don't obsess about ritual hand-washing or keeping kosher or things like that. True. But that doesn't get us off the hook. Pharisees come in many shapes and sizes. Some of them say, "Wash your hands." Others might say, "Don't drink. Don't smoke. Don't go to this movie or listen to that CD." Some Pharisees say, "Real Christians only vote Republican" or "Real Christians only vote Democrat."

Twenty-one: Pharisees come in many shapes and sizes, but they all have one thing in common: Rules. Rules that determine the difference between insiders and outsiders. Rules that can sort out the sheep from the goats. Rules that distinguish "our" people from "those" people.

Twenty-two: I hate to break it to you, but I think maybe *we* are the Pharisees. I think maybe Jesus is talking to *us*.

SONG: "Lord, I Want to Be More Loving in My Heart" (v. 3)

Twenty-two: Jesus might be talking to us, but it's okay. Really. Being a Pharisee is not all bad. Jesus has some good news for Pharisees like us, if we can bear to hear it. This morning, Jesus invites us to trade in the religion of the Pharisees for the Gospel of Christ; to swap our cheap little rules for the costly grace of God.

Twenty-three: And how does he do that?

Twenty-four: First of all, Jesus invites us stay focused on the big picture. The big picture is simply this: Love God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength; and, love your neighbor as yourself. That is Jesus' main agenda; that is Jesus' first priority.

Twenty-five: We Pharisees are bad at priorities. We spend our time and energy on—what else?—our rules: Who is keeping them? Who is breaking them? Who's in? Who's out? Rules can distract us from what matters most. Instead, Jesus offers us the opportunity to put first things first; to put the love of God and love of people ahead of any rule.

Twenty-six: Jesus reminds us this morning what is most important, more important than any rule: to love God, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Twenty-seven: And Jesus does something else here. Instead of the rules that divide us, Jesus introduces us to the God who brings us all together. The “Religion of the Pharisees”—in Jesus’ day, or in ours—loves rules because rules are so useful for dividing people.

Twenty-eight: Rule-based religions build walls between Jew and Gentile, between sinner and saint, between Christian and non-Christian, between white people and black people, between Democrat and Republican. Rules separate and segregate; rules divide and scatter.

Twenty-nine: And that is why Jesus takes such a dim view of rules. The heart of God longs to draw people together. We love to build walls, but God prefers bridges. We love to draw lines, but God prefers circles.

SONG: “Lord, I Want to Be Like Jesus in My Heart” (v. 4)

Thirty: Yes, the love of God draws circles. The love of God in Christ takes people in *–all* people, not just *our* people.

Thirty-one: In Christ, God builds bridges across every gulf that divides us.

Thirty-two: In Christ, God restlessly reaches out, includes, and draws people in.

Thirty-three: In Christ, God relentlessly steps over lines, tears down walls, and disregards rules.

Thirty-four: God’s love in Christ reaches to the near and the far, the rich and the poor, the Democrats and the Republicans, the whites and the blacks and the browns, the sinners and the saints.

Thirty-five: God’s love even reaches to the Pharisees. In Christ, God builds a bridge, even to us; God’s circle can draw us in as well.

Thirty-six: ...Just leave your rules at the door.

ALL: Thanks be to God!