

Proper 17B – “Now when the Pharisees gathered together to him, with some of the scribes, who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands defiled.” Mk 7.1,2

A notable Old Testament scholar recently remarked that for most people, and certainly for non-Jewish readers, reading the Old Testament is like reading other people’s mail. By that he did not mean that reading the Old Testament was like stealing people’s mail to get their credit cards or financial information. Criminal behavior was not the point. Rather, this descriptive comparison meant to highlight how foreign most of us are to the conversation that is occurring in the pages of these ancient texts. We, that is the Gentiles, were not the originally intended recipients of the correspondence. We are not familiar with the setting or context in which this correspondence occurred. The cultural and linguistic nuances are foreign to us. Because we are coming into the conversation late, we often make conclusions based upon limited information. These kinds of conclusions are often wrong. We need help understanding who the persons are and what the gist of their conversation is about. This is the problem with reading other people’s mail.

We come face to face with this problem in our Gospel lesson this morning from Mark. We have little trouble understanding the power and authority that

Jesus displays when he heals the sick, feeds the thousands and commands the storm to be still. Mark has not brought us to the ultimate conclusion yet, but even we, the Gentiles, understand that a man who displays this sort of dominion, is worthy of our attention. But Mark had finished with healings for a moment and had moved on to present Jesus again arguing with the Scribes and Pharisees. These were the religious authorities and legal specialists who had come out into the country to hear for themselves what this Jesus was saying. They had come to determine what kind of Jews Jesus and his disciples were. This is definitely other people's mail. It is evident that Mark is aware of the problem, and that his readers would likely not understand what was going on here. For this reason he included an editorial aside, beginning in verse three. The religious officials wanted to know why it was that some of Jesus' disciples didn't wash their hands before they ate. Mark then informs his readers that the Jews had an intricate tradition of ablutions or washings, not for hands and bodies only, but for cooking utensils as well. These traditions had been developed by the generations of Jewish holy men and would be written down a couple of hundred years after Jesus' day. But they were practiced and handed down by word of mouth at the time of Jesus' ministry. So the Jewish leaders wanted to know from Jesus, "Why won't your disciples keep the traditions of the elders?"

Jesus' response was not the one we might have expected. The Jewish leaders had asked him about their tradition of hand washing specifically. But Jesus answers that the problem is about their tradition in general. "You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men." This was quite a serious charge! As evidence he raised the issue of their duty to care for their own parents. "Honor your father and your mother", Moses had said. "If a man won't care for his aged mother and father he should be put to death", said Moses. But Jesus pressed the Jews saying, "But your tradition says that whatever your parents could have had for their support you have devoted to God and so have left them destitute." Jesus had shown that these so called teachers of holiness, these representatives of God's religion, were in fact hypocrites. They liked to play church, and speak like they knew what God wanted, but after it was all over, they were only in it for the prestige, influence and money. This was the tradition of the elders.

But what about purity? The Jewish leaders had asked him a specific question about staying clean. Was he raising an unrelated issue about parents to avoid addressing the question they had asked? No, he returns to it immediately. God had indeed given the Jews the dietary laws, the Kosher laws, in the book of Leviticus. They were only to eat the meat from vegetarian animals that had divided hoofs and chewed the cud. Pigs were the quintessentially unclean

animal. They could eat fish with fins and scales but they couldn't eat crustaceans like shrimp or crab. They couldn't eat carnivorous birds. They couldn't eat rodents, reptiles or any other animal that swarmed upon the earth. They could eat no dead animal – that is, no road kill. Many of the greatest Jewish martyrs had gone to excruciating deaths at the hands of pagan kings because they wouldn't eat pork. They preferred to keep the law of the Lord rather than the law of the pagan tyrant. So they died.

But now Jesus said to the crowd and his disciples that there was nothing that a man could eat that could make him unclean. What goes in must come out. It is a law of nature. Everybody that has been to the bathroom knows this to be true. Food doesn't go to the heart, it goes to the stomach and then out into the toilet. Therefore, Jesus concluded that all foods were clean. Jesus said that what makes a man unclean is what is already in his heart. By focusing on washing hands and watching what they ate they had missed the point of the God-given law altogether. The impurity was not on the outside but on the inside. Moses wrote the law, Jesus said, not to make them clean, but because their heart was hard against the Lord their God.

We may be tempted to ignore this part of the Gospel as unimportant or at least unimportant for us. Perhaps this chapter is only useful for arguments with your

Jewish friends? It certainly has the feel of reading other people's mail. But I caution you against this kind of conclusion. Mark's insistence in including the controversy in his Gospel, along with explanatory editorial, should be enough to convince us of its importance if not its meaning. But its meaning becomes startlingly clear if we but consider Peter's vision in the Acts of the Apostles. There we find Cornelius the Centurion, the Gentile, praying to God as he did constantly. The angel of the Lord came to him and told him to send messengers to find Peter who would give him the thing that he had been praying for. Meanwhile, Peter had gone up on to the roof top to take a midday nap. As he lay down he fell into a trance and in a vision saw a sheet being let down from Heaven. In it were all the foul, swarming, and unclean animals that God had warned against. Surprisingly, the heavenly voice commanded, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." Peter, a good Jew, responded, "No, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." And God's voice came again, "What God has cleansed, you must not call common." This same vision occurred three times. Then Peter awoke to the sound of Cornelius' servants beating upon the door below. They took him to Cornelius, and Peter said, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit any one of another nation; but God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean." Then Peter preached to him the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost fell upon that household and they were all baptized.

This is an amazing and miraculous event in the life of the Church. This is a mighty and evangelical passage for us to rejoice in. For this is not other people's mail. Instead, this is a love letter written to each of us who are by flesh Gentiles. Jesus himself proclaimed that all foods were clean. Peter refused to eat until the heavenly Father validated what Jesus himself had said: Do not call unclean what I have now made clean. We, the gentiles, who were like pigs to the Jews have now been brought into the family of God. We are no longer left out of the grace filled correspondence between Almighty God and his people. We have been grafted in. The dividing wall has been broken down. We have been made sons, and if sons, then heirs of eternal life and the resurrection body.

But we must be just as clear that our Gospel speaks to the great jeopardy that the human race is in without being made new in Christ Jesus. For we cannot blame our diets, our families or even our neighbors for our uncleanness. There is nothing outside a man that can make him unclean. Instead, all uncleanness comes from the well of impurity which is the human heart. All sins of thought, word and deed come only too naturally to the human condition. All our pride, lust, hypocrisy, addiction to drugs, alcohol and sex are not the fault of the media or the movie industry. They are the constant pets and playthings of our

fallen state. If we cannot be rid of them then we shall be condemned eternally for them. Our modern culture tells us that we need to get in touch with our spirits. If we would be more in tune with ourselves we would be happy, healthy and spiritually invigorated. Bill Cosby said that people told him that that was why they took cocaine. "It amplifies your personality", they said. Cosby replied, "But what happens if you are a horse's rear end?" No, dear friends, we don't need more of ourselves. We need more of Jesus Christ! We don't need more of that well of sewage which is the human heart we need the fountain filled with Christ's cleansing blood! For Ezekiel promised, "Thus says the Lord God, "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances." Let us pray to God, even as Cornelius did, that our heavenly Father may bring us safely into his family, no longer foul beasts and outcast, but that our sins may be forgiven and that we be made new creatures in the image of Christ.

AMEN.