

“Inside-Out & Upside-Down”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Isaiah 1:11-17 & Mark 7:1-23
February 16, 2020 - Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

You’re in the car on your way home from dinner at the home of some lovely friends. As you analyze the evening, you’ll realize that the first smile that greeted you at the door was just a bit too wide and you did feel a smidgen of tension in the air. Still, you were unprepared for the moment when you took a sip of wine and one of your hosts commented that the chicken was a little salty and the other host responded “Your mother’s stuffing is bland and dry — and she hates everything I do!”

You have experienced one of life’s great awkward moments — being dropped into the middle of someone else’s argument. If this has happened to you before, you are ready to hear this text. Listen for the Word of God among the snark as things escalate quickly in the seventh chapter of the Gospel according to Mark:

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 unclean hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with ritually unclean 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 said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban’ (that is, an offering to God)— then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.”

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.”

When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. He said to them, “Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness,

deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

Okay, first things first: *please* wash your hands. This spat between Jesus and the Pharisees came long before the world understood the germ theory of disease. Dear Edgewood member Bob Burney is living under quarantine right now because the flu virus has shown no respect for branch or rank in the halls of the Veterans’ home in Pell City. Bob says that some of his VA buddies have been letting visitors in through side doors, putting everyone at risk. And we have all seen the news stories about the spread of the coronavirus. The very first piece of advice the World Health Organization offers is to “wash your hands frequently.” Nobody is allowed to go home or to work or to school and argue that Jesus told them not to wash their hands.

The Pharisees and Jesus aren’t talking about physical cleanliness. They’re talking about ritual cleanliness, and even then, it becomes clear they’re not really talking about the same thing either. We get dropped into this argument, and so Jesus’s hot response seems a bit disproportionate. The Pharisees asked a question, and in response they got a rant that goes far beyond the topic at hand. There’s clearly more going on here. Some of it we know and some of it is lost to the specific moment.

Mark writes that “the Pharisees, and all the Jews” are doing this ritual washing and that is simply not correct. This is an argument *within* Judaism at the time. All agree that following the Law given to Moses at Mt. Sinai is crucial to being in relationship with God and maintaining Jewish distinctiveness in a world of empire and conquest. *How* to follow the Law is debated. And then there’s this “tradition of the elders” which is not in the scriptures, but is an oral tradition passed down that adds another layer of practices, like ritually washing hands before eating.

The cleaning or purification rituals feel somewhat foreign to us, though baptism clearly emerges from them. When your people have been subjugated, when your cities have been sacked, when your holy temple has been mocked and desecrated and destroyed, protecting the proper practices takes on added weight. The temple is sacred and it must be kept separate from the profane. That word “profane” comes to us from Latin and it literally means “outside the temple” — the things that must be removed before one can enter the holy, separate space to connect with the divine.

In the 1st Century, some Jews were washing hands before eating, and some weren’t. Obviously, the Pharisees are hand-washers and they want you to be as well. Jesus accuses them of hypocrisy with regard to this tradition of the elders. He accuses them of telling mothers and fathers “I gave my offering — my Corban — and that’s how I’m helping you, mom and dad.” For the record, this was not a widespread problem at the time. In fact, quite the opposite — we know that Pharisee policy would have been to tell someone to forego the offering if it would mean taking food out of the mouth of a loved-one in need. So it’s unclear whether Jesus had heard about a specific problem in the area, or whether that piece is exaggeration to make a point.

It's not a new point, this ritual-as-hypocrisy charge that Jesus is leveling. We heard from Isaiah earlier. And two of the most recognizable prophetic messages touch on this point.

Amos tells us that God says:

“I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.” (Amos 5:21-24)

And Micah exhorts:

“‘With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?’ God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:6-8)

God has been trying to tell the people of God for a long time that ritual for ritual's sake is missing the point and backwards and upside-down.

It's not that ritual is bad. But our religious practices are supposed to serve our beliefs, not the other way around. The words “religion” and “ligament” share a Latin root meaning to connect, to bind. The purpose of God's Law is connect us to God and to one another. That's what all those rules are about, creating community that seeks God. The Law is the connective tissue keeping us in relationship with our Creator and our neighbors and our selves. When a religious ritual provides that connection — or the potential for it! — it is holy.

Jesus is not anti-ritual. Just before he is arrested, he gives us one of his own. A new way to connect with God and neighbor and self through bread and cup, no ritual washing required, at least in our tradition. But when the ritual is the thing — when it becomes elevated to the Law itself and serves as a means for judgment or division or self-righteousness, then we have a problem.

Jesus takes his stance less against the ritual cleansing than the attitude he sees. And, in classic Jesus fashion, he takes this argument about the specifics of the tradition and magnifies it. He really gets going and talks about the food itself and then about the people themselves. He uses ancient potty humor to make a point — that what goes in and then out into the sewer can't hurt your relationship to God.

You are not defined by what goes in, by what happens to you,
by what circumstance you have encountered.

Rather, you are defined by what comes from within, by what you put out into the world.

Holiness cannot be imposed upon you. Faithfulness is not a harness or a rein placed upon you. The goodness we bring and the pain we cause are an inside-out struggle, not outside-in. And, thanks be to God, the grace we know in Christ works through all the blessings we give and the messes we make.

As a minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (USA), I am honor-bound to remind you that an idea like this — that what connects us to God and one another and our selves is what we put out into the world — is not just personal. Our struggles and our successes are magnified in community.

This week we learned that the Trump administration is diverting \$3.8 billion from the Department of Defense to build its border wall. That takes \$1.5 billion that was allocated to buy equipment for National Guard and Reserve units.¹

This week we also got a peek at the president's budget plan. Each year when we present our church budget, we mention that a budget is a theological document, indicating in stark terms what is most important to a community.

The budget that President Trump presented includes about \$2 trillion in cuts to safety net programs and student loan initiatives. Cuts include spending on the health program for people in poverty and people with disabilities that we call Medicaid. Cuts include eliminating subsidized federal student loans and ending the public service loan forgiveness program, which provides incentives for students who go on to be teachers and police officers and other public servants.²

I suppose that's one way to build community: telling folks that there are dangerous people who want to get in, and then building walls to keep them out, and then building terrific stock market numbers on the backs of the most vulnerable and those who serve.

I'm just not persuaded that it has anything to do with what God calls us to be.

Isaiah shares God's Word:

“Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”

May whatever practices we undertake, whatever connective tissue we construct, find us turning to our God for mercy as we are compelled by our rituals to remember to follow the Word of God, who is Christ Jesus, who brings comfort and not shame to all who cry out in hunger.

Amen.

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2020/02/13/805796618/trump-administration-diverts-3-8-billion-in-pentagon-funding-to-border-wall>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/10/business/economy/trump-budget-explained-facts.html>