

Tradition!

Mark 7:1-23

The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights

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*To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit
<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2018/05/sermon05-27-20181.mp3>*

I remember the first time I ever paid a dry-cleaning bill. I was student at Hanby Jr. High School and the time, and my introduction to the world of professional cleaning services came as a result of an incident that occurred at lunch the previous week. I had liberally doused a school-issued “tater tot” with ketchup and thrown it across the cafeteria, where it made an astonishingly vivid imprint on the brand-new purple dress being worn by my classmate Tricia.



Food fights. We’ve all seen them. Some of us have started them. When we got down to the Principal’s office following a cafeteria altercation, all of us probably had the same conversation:

“Why did you do that, young man? What possessed you to throw processed potato product at the girls’ table?”
[Shrug]. “I dunno.”

Of course, most of the time, we *do* know what starts food fights. They are almost always a diversion – an attempt to draw someone’s attention from one thing to another thing.

- I can’t say that I have a crush on that person, so I’ll launch an attack of candy corn and veggie sticks.
- I’m not ready for the test that’s coming up next period, so I’ll try to get sent to the office instead.
- Something scary is about to occur, so I’ll create an alternative scenario that will attract more adults into the room and prevent that other thing from happening...



tell this one?

¹Mark takes only 16 chapters to tell the entire story of Jesus' ministry, and yet he devotes at least half a chapter to describing a first-century food fight. Out of all the stories he could have told about Jesus, why does he

It would appear as though the story we've heard this morning is here to help readers in the first century – as well as the rest of us – to consider the ways that Jesus understood the core responsibilities of those who would walk with God.

We're told of a confrontation between the disciples of Jesus and a group of Pharisees and Scribes. In this corner, we have the men and women to whom Jesus has dedicated the best and last years of his earthly life as he sought to equip and train them to proclaim the nearness of the Kingdom and the Gospel message. In the other corner, there are the big guns – the theological heavyweights of the day, including at least a few who have been sent up to Galilee by the religious headquarters in Jerusalem.

The apparent conflict is over a small detail of tradition: why don't Jesus' followers wash their hands the way that we've always been taught to wash our hands?

I should point out here that nobody, including the boys from Jerusalem, is implying that the disciples are eating with dirty hands. No, the bone of contention is that the followers of Jesus had not participated in the ceremonial cleansing that had become the practice of the day. It's not a concern about hygiene – rather, it's a complaint about orthodoxy, authority, and tradition.

¹ *Sadducees and Pharisees*, James Tissot, c. 1890



²The real question is, “Jesus, why don’t you teach your followers to act like us? Why don’t you tell them to live the way that we live?” The Pharisees and the Scribes are relying on their position of privilege, looking at the followers of Jesus as though they are some sort of backwater hicks – deplorables, if you will. They are dismissive of the disciples and of Jesus, and they couch their derision and criticism in an appeal to tradition and to the Bible.

Jesus, as you’ve heard, responds by pointing out that one can do all sorts of horrible things (like neglecting one’s parents, for instance) while claiming to be doing other, wonderful things (like paying for a new roof for the temple while getting a nice fat tax write-off at the same time, for instance).

In the conversation that ensues, Jesus apparently dismisses large sections of the Hebrew Bible (such as the dietary regulations) while pointing to the reality that a key aspect and indeed responsibility of living in the Kingdom is seeking to grow more deeply in our concern for and attentiveness to the things that are of ultimate importance.

The early Christian community heard the story of this food fight and assumed that it meant that none of the Old Testament laws concerning keeping a kosher kitchen had any relevance in the new understanding of faith. We know that this is what they thought because the author of Mark, speaking for the community, says so right there in verse 19: “In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.”

² *Pharisees*, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff (1912)

And for centuries, those who would follow Jesus have found this to be a very serviceable, helpful interpretation. It flows nicely from the text; it makes sense; and I get to eat all the bacon I want. Talk about your win-win situations!



But is that *all* that this text means? I would propose that such a reading is incomplete, and in fact suggest that in the seventh chapter of Mark's gospel, Jesus engages the Pharisees, the Scribes, the disciples, the first Christians, and us in a discussion on the role and authority of scripture in our lives.

Think about it: is the purpose of the Bible to control what you *do*? That is, is the primary concern that lies behind the giving of God's word that of making sure that you don't eat shrimp, always tell the truth, and don't forget to give your money to God?

Or is the Bible more concerned with seeking to engage us as to what kind of people we should *be*? That is, helping us to realize the call to be generous, respectful, and loving?

For a number of weeks, a small group of us have been meeting in a Faithbuilders group to consider some thinking by a church leader named Brian McLaren, who in his book *A New Kind of Christianity* points out that those who saw themselves as Jesus' opponents on that day were treating the Bible and the traditions of God's people as a constitution of sorts. That is, a collection of sayings and laws that are given to us to help us know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, what is permissible and what is not. In this view – which is at least as prevalent today as it was 2000 years ago, the Bible is an unchanging document designed to establish who's in and who's out. Oh, and spoiler alert: we're on top. We're God's favorites.

Jesus brings to the discussion the notion that the purpose of Scripture is rather to point toward the heart of God even while revealing the strengths and weaknesses of those whom God has used to help craft, record, and preserve the scriptures. He goes on to accuse the religious leaders of his (and, I'd submit, subsequent) day of hiding behind a particular Bible verse or two in order to defend their own positions, preserve their own power, or get their own way. Isn't it convenient when I am free to interpret the Bible in such a way as to indicate that God is actually commanding me to do something that I was already planning to do anyway?

What if the purpose of the Bible is not to provide us with a seamless set of codes of conduct for every situation, or a litmus test for religious or theological purity, or recipes for how to be happy and wealthy because we always do exactly what God tells us to do?

Rather, what if scripture is a record of a people who engage (or are engaged by) the presence of the Divine in such a way as to stimulate their own faith, to enhance their abilities to walk with Jesus more faithfully, and to respond to the world around them as if God cared for, created, and was in fact active in that world?

To put it a different way, what if the Bible is not so much a rulebook listing for you and me every eventuality that we are to face in life and offering us instructions as to exactly what to do or think in that situation, but is instead more like a diary or a blog written by people who had caught glimpses of God at work in their lives or in the world and offering us clues as to how we might be better equipped to be God's people in the world right now?

I'd like you to try something. I'm going to be quiet for 15 seconds. In that time, I'd like for you to think of an instance

where your mind or awareness has substantively changed on a particular issue in the last 10 or 15 years. I'm not looking for reflections like, "You know, I always thought that beets were disgusting, but then I tried that recipe I saw on **The Chew** and WOW! Delicious!"

I'm talking about something real and important in some way. Maybe your thinking about homosexuality and the faith, or issues about race, or thoughts about the environment or our economy.

In the next 15 seconds, ask yourselves, "Where has my mind changed?"

When you think of something, then ask, "What role, if any, has scripture played in that shift?"

Here's what I think: if we see the Bible or the interpretation of that Bible that we've received as being more like a rule book or a constitution, then any change from that is a mistake. If the Bible is an unchanging code of conduct that tells us what is up and what is down, what is black and what is white, and what is right and what is wrong... then if our understanding of those rules has changed, we are questioning the very basics of the faith. In a system where the Word is the Word, where God said it and I believe it and that settles it – then if my thinking on, say, divorce and remarriage has changed, well, I must be getting soft on scripture and its authority in my life. I know this because I can think of half a dozen places where my own thinking has changed, and I could name scores of people who would be happy to tell you that I am devaluing the unchanging and inerrant word of God and departing from the truth in some way.



But if we see the Bible as a living, breathing document with which I am called to interact so that I might grow in my ability to really walk with Jesus, then perhaps at least some changes could be understood to be fruit – and therefore, not something to be feared, but rather something to be explored or cultivated.

The call for this day is for us to look for ways in which we can engage with, or be engaged by scripture, each other, and the world as a means to grow deeper in our appreciation for and investment in the things that matter to God. I think that means that we will have to reject the temptation to treat specific Bible verses or ancient teachings of the community as creative or convenient means by which we can sidestep or avoid the intentions of God.

It's easy to get sidetracked and not even know it. For instance, I experience an inner pang of revulsion and distaste when I hear someone referring to immigrants or refugees as animals, or using terms that make those people less than human. Such conversation does not resonate with any of my experience, my understanding of scripture, or even my political leanings.

However, when that language is used, and someone else refers to the speaker by saying, "Oh, for crying out loud! *That* guy? What a pig!"... am I equally offended? That is to say, am I as troubled by the dehumanization of the one with whom I disagree as I am by the dehumanization of the one for whom I have some affinity? If not, then I think I have some growing to do.

The fellas from the head office came up to Galilee that day and told Jesus that they were going to keep an eye on him – that they wanted to see how he and his disciples were

“walking” and “living.” He gave them an earful – but so far as I can tell, he didn’t do anything to discourage them from sticking around. My hope and my prayer is that you and I might be smart enough to stick close to Jesus, to learn to walk as he walked so that we might live as he lived. I know that means that I’ve got some growing to do, and I suspect that the same is true for you as well. Thanks be to God for the gift of this community that enables us to engage in this practice together. Amen.