

15th Sunday after Pentecost
James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
September 2, 2018

Holy

I think I was about 8 years old when the church my father served in San Antonio, Texas, built a brand-new manse. (A manse is a house that a congregation provides its pastor and family. It belongs to the church, but the pastor, spouse, and “P.K.’s” get to live there. You don’t hear much about manses anymore, but back in the day, they were common.)

The manse was built in a suburb of San Antonio. We moved in before the landscaping was finished, so the church sent a contractor to haul in some topsoil to establish a lawn. There was no way grass was going to grow on that mixture of sand and caliche that surrounded our spanking new abode. We needed topsoil.

It was Saturday morning. My Dad and I were standing in what would eventually become the front yard, talking with a contractor. “I’ll have a crew here tomorrow,” the man said. “We’ll get the job done.”

“No, sir. Not tomorrow,” my Dad replied. “Tomorrow’s the sabbath. In this house, we don’t work on the sabbath.”

It was a small thing, and I’m sure my Dad had no idea what an impact that conversation had on me, but I’ve never forgotten it.

My father was not a rigid Sabbatarian. He drove his car on Sundays and we kids were allowed to play outside on Sunday afternoons. But we couldn’t go to birthday parties on Sundays and we didn’t use the washing machine or go out to movies. As much as possible, my parents tried to maintain Sunday as the Lord’s Day – a “day of rest and gladness,” as the old hymn puts it, a day for re-creation.

Now that blue laws are off the books, even in the South, that approach to sabbath-keeping seems quaint and perhaps a bit Puritanical. Looking back on it now, it feels to me like an extraordinary gift. For one whole day every week, our family stepped off the consumerist treadmill and took a deep breath. We went to church in the morning. We had lunch together. We played together. And then, of course, on Sunday night we went back to church for the evening service.

A routine like that wasn't hard to pull off back in the 1950's. Most stores were closed. The public schools didn't dare schedule meetings or rehearsals. Nobody played soccer, and even if we had wanted to go to a movie, the movie houses were shut tight. It was hard to find gas for the car on Sundays. Most gas stations were closed, too.

There is much to criticize regarding that approach to sacred ritual. No doubt other parents – especially those who worked in service industries – couldn't afford to take a whole day off. Nevertheless, what I learned from that conversation I overheard while standing in our yet-to-be front yard was this: *There are more important things in life than making money or even having a nice green lawn like your neighbors. God comes first in our family. We're going to honor God every day, but especially on Sundays.*

The Pharisees get a bad rap in the Gospels. The very word "Pharisee" has come to mean "wet blanket," "sourpuss," "party-pooper," or even worse, "hypocrite." In fact, the Pharisees of Jesus' day were not terrible people. They were just folks who tried their best to maintain their identity as God's covenant people in a world that was trying its best to get them to forget who they are.

In that sense, Pharisees are not much different from you and me.

In today's Gospel reading, a group of Pharisees from Jerusalem notices that some of Jesus' disciples are sharing a meal without having first washed their hands. Handwashing before meals was not just a good idea, it was a way of "**observing the tradition of the elders.**" In other words, it was a way for the people of Israel to maintain their uniqueness as God's chosen people.

In fact, there is no biblical law about washing hands before eating. There is a provision in the book of Exodus that requires priests to wash their hands before ministering at the altar. By extension, this also meant washing before eating meat from the sacrifices.

So, the Bible doesn't actually require ordinary Jews to wash their hands before every meal, but the Pharisees took seriously the command of Exodus 19:6, **"You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation."**

To their credit, the Pharisees argued that if all God's people are called to be holy, then they all should all wash their hands, just like the priests at the altar. This is more or less an Old Testament spin on the Christian doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

"So how come your disciples don't wash their hands?" the Pharisees want to know. "Don't they want to live according to the tradition of the elders? Have they forgotten that they, too, are called to be holy?"

What the Pharisees don't know at this juncture in Mark's Gospel is that Jesus is about to go into Gentile territory to bring his message about the coming kingdom of God. The Pharisees, God bless them, are trying their best to keep their fellow Jews from becoming "defiled" by contact with non-Jews, and here is Jesus about to go into enemy territory having let his disciples drop their guard.

You can almost hear the Pharisee's thinking:

Jesus is on a slippery slope. Today it's hand washing. Tomorrow it will be eating at the same table with Gentiles. Before you know it, God's people will be undisguisable from everyone else.

The issue in this story isn't so much hand washing as it is the very nature of holiness. What makes a person holy? What makes a people holy? Is it keeping the sabbath? Is it washing your hands? Is it building a wall between God's people and everybody else? Or is it something else?

Jesus makes it clear that holiness is about obeying God's command, which is another way of saying God's word. It's easy to mistake adherence to rituals like handwashing and sabbath-keeping for holiness, but they're not the same thing.

For instance, you can refuse to work on Sundays, but ignore the fact that the workers who serve you Sunday lunch at your favorite restaurant are not being paid a living wage.

You can sponsor seminars in your church about the plight of the working poor, while the night janitor cleans your sanctuary – the same janitor your church employs as a “private contractor” in order to avoid providing medical insurance for him and his family.

You can train priests to say mass at your altars, while maintaining an elaborate system of protection for priests who molest children.

You can rail against same-sex marriage from the pulpit of your cathedral, while ignoring the log in your own eye and your own deep need for mercy.

You can maintain an institution that looks good on the outside, but does not do justice, or love mercy, or walk humbly with God.

Jesus quotes the prophet: **“This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”**

In one way or another, that describes every church today, including this one.

Almost every Sunday after worship, I pick up my sermon notes and my book of liturgy and walk back to the church office. By that time, I’m usually thinking about lunch. More often than not, I find a line of people waiting to ask for help.

One man needs work boots to start a new job. Another has been banned from the Kearny Center for 30 days. (When that happens to you, you’re sunk. There are no other alternatives for housing in this town for someone in that circumstance). Yet another person is holding a prescription for a drug to manage her seizures. She has just come from the emergency room. She is still wearing her hospital name band.

By this time, I’m not thinking about lunch anymore. I’m thinking about the last line from today’s Epistle reading – the part where James writes, **“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this; to care for the orphans and the widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”**

Perhaps James managed to pull that off – to show compassion for “the least of these” without becoming “stained” – stained by compassion fatigue, or despair, or, worst of all, by cynicism. Perhaps James figured out how to be holy without falling into the same trap as the Pharisees and without building a wall within his own heart.

If he did, he didn't put it in his letter.

I suppose that's just as well. It's up to each generation of Christians to work out how to be holy in the fullest biblical sense. Holiness is more than going to church, singing, praying, and giving alms, but it is not less than that. Holiness is more than tending to the poor, seeking justice, and living in humility before God, but it is not less than that.

Whatever measure of holiness we might achieve is itself a gift of God. It is God who makes us holy. Until our baptism is complete in death, you and I will always be a work in progress.