

Sermon: Not washing the hands but washing the heart
Mark 7:1-8, 14-24
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The Gospel story today is interesting - it is about food and food always has my keen interest.

When I was a child, I hated eating carrots. My parents forced me to eat at least five of them whenever my mother cooked them. I was clever – I was able to each time drop them secretly in my lap when my parents would not look at me. Then I said that I had to go to the kitchen to drink some water so that I could throw the carrots on the roof of a shed in the garden. My parents never noticed. Later, I confessed my sin :)

Jesus spoke in our Gospel story about food, but the issue of taste was not the question. The question was, does it matter for God what we eat.

What is really important for God? How we dress? What we eat? That we wash our hands before eating. Maybe our mothers made a fuss about that, but does God care?

The Jewish people in the days of Jesus believed it did matter for God, because their laws were very much about what to eat and what not to eat.

1. Not what we eat makes us unclean but how we think and act.

Jesus seemed to disagree with that. For him, what you eat or drink seemed not so important.

Why was it important for St Mark, to underline that Jesus declared all food to be okay for eating?

This was because at time when Mark wrote these stories, there was much tension in churches between the believers from Jewish and non-Jewish backgrounds - exactly about what food to eat. You see this issue come back in many of the letters of the New Testament.

This is why Mark not only faithfully reports what Jesus said, but he also added his own comments to explain the approach of Jesus for his readers.

The Christian Jews, in their culture, had strict rules for their food, but the gentile Christians ate everything, and this created separation in their churches. Christians with a Jewish background tended to separate themselves from those unclean gentile Christians.

Mark underlines: as far as Jesus himself is concerned, it does not matter what you eat. What really matters is not what goes into the belly, but what comes out the heart. True defilement is not a matter of the belly but of the heart.

This means, Jewish Christians can without any problem enter into the homes of non-Jewish Christians, and enjoy meals together.

It is very interesting that Mark describes that after the discussions about cleanliness of food, Jesus went to the gentile area of Tyre and Sidon, in modern-day Lebanon, where he entered into house. A house of gentiles of course. For Jesus it was normal to enter the home of gentiles.

To us this sound normal, nothing special. But for the Jews in the time of Jesus this was shocking.

Jesus said that the food laws of the Old Testament were not so important! Why? Because for him, to have community with other people - showing love to people - was more important than what you eat or drink. Never allow what you eat or not eat, to separate you from others.

Imagine that someone comes to your home and as soon as you put your best food on the table, he says: I do not want this, I cannot eat with you, it is unclean... God is against it...

This is NOT very good for relationships, is it?

Imagine you kneel together for Holy Communion and some then say: I will not kneel beside you because you are impure. I do not like what you eat, how you dress, I do not like your accent, I do not like the color of your skin. Because you are not like me, I cant be close to you.

2. Attitude of Jews - we should not consider our own habits so important that is separates us from others

The religious teachers, especially the Pharisees totally disagreed with Jesus. For them, the laws, the traditions came above all! Their laws were more important than other people.

They saw some disciples of Jesus eat without washing their hands and they were upset because according to their traditions, the washing of hands before meals was very important.

This washing of hands was a big deal for them, because it was part of the traditions of the Elders. The Elders, those were the two Great Jewish Theologians, Hillel and Shammai.

Those great heroes of the tradition, these mediators of the will of God, disagreed about much but not about the religious importance of extensive washings. This was not a hygienic matter, but a matter of religious purity. Without these washing, you would not be acceptable for God God.

And without this ritual purity, people were not allowed in the Temple. You could not pray without washing your hands. Just as for muslims, prayer is impossible without first ging through similar purifications.

The traditions of the Jews were mostly about matters of purification, especially about the cleansing of kitchen utensils. Imagine that you would touch impure food.

Mark explains for his gentile readers, in 7:4, that those Jews washed so many things ritually:

And when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.

Imagine how defiled you can become in the marketplace – with all those unclean people everywhere. If good Jews would come home, they had to purify themselves and what they bought in the market. And all cups, kettles, all things that were used to carry food in, had to be thoroughly rinsed.

By the way, in Mark 6 – just before the story that we read, Jesus had fed thousands who also ate with unwashed hands. And after that Jesus went to the marketplaces, where lots of people touched Jesus:

And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or countryside, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and implored him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well. (Mark 6:56)

Imagine. Impure, sinful people were touching Jesus for being healed, in the markets. Jesus did not ask them first whether they were ritually clean. Those were normal people; of course the crowds were not ritually clean. They did not follow all those laws of God!

And after all this, some of the disciples then ate without purifying themselves. Bread eaten with unwashed hands was considered like *excrement* by the major Jewish theologians.

Hands has to be washed to the wrist to be considered clean, otherwise you had big problems with God.

But Jesus made clear that for God, washing your hands or not, is unimportant. Wash them, or do not wash them. For God it does not matter. The dirt that you eat leaves the body in the toilet, Jesus said.

We must never let issues of food, drinks, cultural habits, become a problem between believers.

But why did Jesus respond so strongly? Could Jesus not have been a bit more accommodating to the Jewish leaders? Could he not have told his disciples who forgot to wash their hands, “come on guys, do not upset the Pharisees, these are nice traditions. Yella, go and wash them...”

But instead, Jesus resisted their comments about the washing of hands - NOT just because of those traditions of washing hands themselves, I believe, but because of the general additional theologies and teachings of the synagogues that went far beyond the pale of Holy Scripture.

Alfred Edersheim, a Messianic Jew, speaks in his book “The life and time of Jesus the Messiah” of the “infinite distance between Christ and the teaching of the synagogue.” (Alfred Edersheim, the life and time of Jesus the Messiah, (Hendrickson Publishers, 2009, p 485)

Edersheim mentions how many Jews even believed that *God himself* had to be purified sometimes. ‘Did God not go to Egypt to save Israel? So he came in contact with paganism and needed purification. Likewise, after God buried Moses, as he touched a corpse He immersed himself in a bath of fire.’

A man who ate with unclean hands was, according to these Jewish fairy tales, subject to the attacks of a demon called Shibta. To omit to wash the hands in the proper way made one subject to poverty and destruction.

So Jesus could not just be indifferent to this sort of traditionalism.

3. But not all habit, traditions are bad. The issue is deeper. It is about choice for heart/mind for blessing people.

Jesus and those Pharisees spoke completely different languages when it came to religion and God. The Pharisees were not bad people, they truly wanted to serve God... but Jesus rejected their theology - their view of God. He taught a radically new doctrine in Israel:

Things cannot be unclean; and *things* do not make us unclean. Our behavior and our heart are the things that make us unclean toward God. From a clean heart, good things

come; and evil behavior comes from a defiled heart. Is your heart pure, that is the question.

From a defiled heart, Jesus says, things like evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, jealousy, envy, slander, pride come... All these things are bad for the Christian community. They destroy our unity. To think that God is pleased if you do not eat this or that, is plainly ridiculous if you compare it what is truly important.

God's desire is to see his children be united in love; for that, we must do away with all things that can separate us. And if our cultural habits create division, we must do away with it. Things that separate us, those are truly sinful. These are the things that defile us.

Traditions are not bad at all. Many are very beautiful. They link us to our forefathers and how they lived. Church traditions link us to the earliest churches in history. Jesus does not turn against tradition in itself; he turns against traditions that obscure the primary meaning of the law – love for God and for all people.

Whatever traditions we have inherited from our forefathers, whatever habits we hold dear, all this has to be seen in the light of this central meaning of Scripture.

Sticking to whatever we hold dear cannot be at the expense of applying the word of God in its basic meaning – and this basic meaning is summarized by Jesus in the words we use at the beginning of our service: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and your neighbor as yourself.

This is the ultimate criterion for all we do, even for our own beautiful religious traditions. Do our opinions and does our behavior unite Christians together? If our habits push other Christians away from us, we make a grave mistake. Does your lifestyle attract people?

This does not mean that we have to adapt our traditions and habits whenever someone comes to us and says he does not like them. That person probably makes his own habits and traditions the criterion. The issue is that Jesus wants to shift the focus from any tradition or law or habit, to the heart of the matter.

Conclusion

We must make sure that our good and beautiful cultural habits do not come in the way of what is best – that is living our life in love for God and for each other.

We do not live to carve traditions into stone, we do not live for our church's habits. Not for our history. Not even for our future. We do not live for our beautiful habits.

We live for God and for His people and we are called to gather, not to create walls. To go out to people, not to hold them off. God wants to reconcile, not to divide.

He wants us to love and to be a blessing. That is what our life should be about and nothing – not even our best principles and habits and traditions - should ever get priority over loving God and other people.

Amen