

Proper 17B – August 30, 2015

**Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Psalm 45:1-2, 7-10; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean**

The gospel lesson today portrays Jesus taking issue with the religious authorities in two ways. First, they fail to see the forest for the trees. Instead of paying attention to the important mandates of justice, mercy and inclusion, they focus on their customs concerning ritual purity, which unnecessarily divides them from others. Secondly, they concern themselves with the externals of these customs—and with those who don't measure up—rather than with the real issue of their own shadow sides, their own unrighteousness and hypocrisy. Having said that, it's very important to remind ourselves of the context regarding the family fight of the early church with its mother Judaism, how Mark's and Matthew's gospels include this interaction of Jesus with the authorities, and why they inject some of their later confrontations back into this scene. For it was after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and the cessation of the functions of the temple priests in 70 CE—some 40 years after Jesus' own confrontations with the religious authorities—that the Pharisee party emerged as the dominant group in Judaism. It was then that they applied the priestly purity laws to the Jewish people as a whole, which was seen as a too heavy and misdirected burden for ordinary people. Yet, as a scattered and repressed minority in Asia Minor after the destruction of Jerusalem, the emerging rabbinic leadership of the Pharisees emphasized such external signs of piety *not* because they were hypocrites interested in externals, but because they wanted to name distinctive markers to distinguish the holy people of God in a larger pluralistic society. The leaders were concerned that Judaism not become diluted, assimilated, and thus lost into the surrounding world after the destruction of their holy shrine that had given them national and focused identity. Mark's Jewish-Christian church community was under pressure to conform to these outward practices. As is typical of emergent groups (such as the early church) coming out of traditional ones (such as Judaism), there was a strong egalitarian feeling and a distrust of "official" leadership and the clericalism and customs associated with it.

But our concern here is not about outward forms of piety or religious identity, but about inner attitudes and hypocritical behaviors. The argument is not with genuine Jewish piety, but with the corruption of it. The theme that echoes through our readings today is the grounding of faith and worship in acts of steadfast loving-kindness and the doing of justice, rather than just prescribed practices or affirmations of correct dogma.

It's not that rituals of worship or other religious observances are wrong. In fact, as Frederick Buechner points out, these expressions are one very appropriate way to worship God, by doing things for God that *we* need to do, such as singing songs for God, and creating beautiful things to glorify God, or giving up certain things to be more available to God, or telling God what's on our minds and in our hearts.ⁱ Quite a variety of such expressions abound within various religious traditions, including our own Christian practices, whether it's a Quaker Meeting, say, or a charismatic or Pentecostal high energy blowout, or a solemn High Mass, or the practices of public worship and personal devotion we have here in this parish. Such rituals and practices, if they retain an element of joy and do not become mere obligations or routines, are ways to connect with God and to build strong resilient

communities, families, and individual lives. God knows we need rituals like these. Such rituals also gather the community and, once gathered, help build strong relationships. And with strong relationships comes the capacity to act effectively on our faith and values in the wider world and thus to worship God in ways that God needs to be served.

Worship literally means “to serve”, so what we call worship is serving, and what we call serving is worship. And so, the other way to worship God, as Buechner also points out, is to do things for God that God needs to have done - such as to run errands for God and carry messages for God—in other words, to be God’s hands and feet, caring and sharing, taking sides on matters of injustice, or standing in the middle as agents of God’s reconciliation, healing, and wholeness.ⁱⁱ These are the types of worship first and foremost called for in the Bible. For example, the prophet Isaiah stated, “Thus says the Lord... Is not this the fast [i.e., the worship] I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them...?”ⁱⁱⁱ

When the fundamental connection is broken between the piety or ritual worship we need to do, and the worship through steadfast loving-kindness that God needs to have done; when that connection is broken, then such piety and religious discipline becomes hollow, shallow, and irresponsible while presuming to be true or even holy. The Hebrew word for piety is derived from the same root as the word for steadfast loving-kindness – “hesed”. Loving kindness is the act of giving of oneself, shown without partiality to Jew or Gentile, rich or poor, and is so portrayed in the heart of Jewish ethics from the Hebrew prophets of the eighth century BCE all the way to Jesus, and then James as our second reading shows.^{iv}

When this disconnection happened, the prophets and then Jesus and others reminded these good people of piety that in not owning up to their own shadow side, they not only lost their connection to their brothers and sisters whom they thought were impure, foreign, other; but in doing so, they risked separating themselves from the very God they thought they were so close to in their piety and ritual and custom.

How do these lessons translate into our current situation? In our present day, it’s not so much notions of ritual purity in our piety and worship that divide us from others as it is popular illusions that some people are simply destined to be winners and others to be losers. For example, people who work hard and help their neighbors, community, nation, and planet—often for miserably low wages and no benefits, or even on voluntary bases—are often not seen as full contributors to society, and certainly not as wealth creators. This includes many of our new immigrant neighbors; our youth, stay-at-home parents, elders or the disabled. Yet we know how much many of these people contribute generously to the quality of life, to civil society, to what we used to call the *commonwealth*—the common-wealth. It is in this regard that we further separate ourselves from one another and from God in so many ways.

It’s a great mistake to suppose that God is chiefly interested in religion, or I should say religions. I believe God is more interested in creation, in humanity. Jesus came to bring us to our true humanity much more than to a religion called Christianity. He came to “increase in us *true religion*” as the Collect today states—*religion*, from the Latin, “religio” meaning “to

bind together”—as we see in the related words *ligament* and *ligature*. Jesus came to bring us to a human understanding that we cannot hold ourselves apart from one another, that we are related to one another not only because we came from the same primeval dust of the earth, but because we are all made in the image and likeness of God. And when we cannot or will not know and love the other, whoever the other may be, we cannot or will not know and love God. Jesus not only teaches us this, but shows this in his very life. He teaches us and shows that God loves us and desires us to express and model that same love and mercy that is the true worship of God. And, as Jesus and James both state emphatically in today’s lessons, action speaks louder than words, response louder than ritual. The only way that the unmerciful world around us can really know God’s mercy and know that this is the way God is and who God is, is if we show others. This is God’s desire - this is the true and connected worship God most needs to have us do - to join Christ’s mission of repairing the world and restoring human hearts in right relationships. And once connected, or re-connected, then our religion will be true and our worship will be “in spirit and in truth.”^v

ⁱ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (London: Collins, 1973), pp. 97-98

ⁱⁱ Buechner, *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Isaiah 58:6-7. In this seventh chapter of Mark, Jesus encounters the party of purity called the Pharisees, whose understanding of the right practice of piety and worship meant the exclusion of many with whom Jesus was associating openly. In saying what he says and in acting the way he does Jesus is making a serious and disillusioning point. As Barbara Taylor points out, the big disillusionment for some of these super-righteous was that God was not where they thought. They thought God was supposed to be with them – just them - when they prayed and fasted and studied the Scriptures and ritually purified themselves. They thought nothing pleased God more than to find them on their knees, or covered in ashes and fasting assiduously, separated off from the impure and those of questionable reputations. But they were wrong. Jesus showed them by word and deed just how wrong they were. They thought God was supposed to be with them in their anxious asceticism, pure piety and rigorous ritualism. But God wasn’t just there with them. God was also somewhere else (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1995), pp. 67-71).

^{iv} Nonetheless, they found themselves confronting and being confronted by particular groups who had chosen ritual purity over and apart from love and justice shown toward the “non-pure”: the foreigner, the poor, or the otherwise “unclean.”

^v John 4:24