

August 22, 2021

Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost

“Right Church Folk”

Mark 7:1-13

Our Gospel text today makes plain a simple truth of Christian faith that I hope we all are aware of, but because of our fallen nature bent toward sin and self-glorification it's always good to review and reflect on such things.

Our text really only has two players: Jesus and the Pharisees. We know the Pharisees are opposed to Jesus—out to get Him—so we naturally consider them bad and nasty. But remember who these guys are in first-century Israeli society; these are the good church folk and that truth shouldn't be lost on us 21<sup>st</sup> century good church folk.

We also need to take note of the context here. Jesus and the disciples just got out of the boat in Gennesaret in Galilee and people throughout the region are bringing the lame and sick to Jesus and being healed. But the good church folk Pharisees aren't helping in Jesus' work of mercy. What are they concerned about? The way His disciples wash their hands before a meal!

*“They saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands, holding to the tradition of the elders, 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.) And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, ‘Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?’”*

Jesus rightly unloads on them straight from God's Word: *“Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.”* And Jesus then points to a glaring example of how they do this in their holy-roller tradition of Corban which gives them an out from spending money to take care of their parents—you know, that Fourth Commandment in God's Word thing.

How did the Pharisees, the good church folk, get to such a point where the Son of God, the promised Messiah, is standing right in front of them condemning them with words of judgment? Ironically, it came from them being obsessed with being good church folk!

When Jerusalem fell and Israel was taken into the Babylonian captivity for 70 years it was a wake-up call. Many Jews recognized it was punishment for faithlessness and idolatry and much of their culture turned toward faithful obedience to Yahweh's Word, specifically the Torah, the Law. The point became their keeping of the law. And it seems that as they focused on what they were doing, they developed rules and traditions so that they could better keep it. And eventually it was the thinking and rules and traditions of theirs that took center stage...and Yahweh's promises about grace, mercy and Messiah got lost somewhere in the translation. Their lips spoke Yahweh, but their hearts were focused on themselves and their own goodness, holiness and merit.

In light of this, the simple truth of the Christian faith I want to make clear today is that if you're here today because you're good church folk, you're doing it wrong. The Pharisees thought they were good church folk and, in that, they were not just being awful church folk—they were being anti-Christ folk!

Make no mistake—self-examination in the light of God's Word is a wonderful and necessary thing. Working out your salvation with fear and trembling requires this, and we surely should be continually working to live a more sanctified and holy life, which necessarily involves

working to purge unholy sin from our person and life. If you don't do this, yeah, there's some big problems there. But if that is the main focus, you're just being a Pharisee. If you think sitting in that pew today is you accomplishing something good before God, you're missing the point. You do not rightly come through those doors because you are good church folk. You rightly come through those doors because you are poor, miserable sinner and what is to be found here is nothing of you and everything of the grace of a merciful God in Christ.

Think about what happened that day! Jesus was miraculously putting right the effects of sin by healing the sick, lame, blind and deaf, yet the good church folk were thinking themselves above that and had the audacity to point out flaws in the disciples that didn't measure up to their holiness. Meanwhile the disciples—the ones with “hands that were defiled”—were faithfully dwelling in the kingdom of God in humbly submitting to the gracious leading of Christ!

That's kind of what is happening if people come in here thinking they are good, righteous church folk. Jesus is putting right what is wrong, pouring out His blood-bought Gospel gifts of forgiveness, life and salvation upon those who come to Him knowing they don't deserve it, cannot ever earn it, never can repay it, but are faithfully begging for it to save them from themselves and their own damnable sin! But if you approach Him as good church folk, well, then you just don't need what He is dishing out, do you? If you have your own righteousness, what do you need His for?

The fact is that if you consider yourself good church folk, you might even take offense at the Word of Christ, because that Word is both Gospel and Law, and the Law accuses, and Pharisees really don't like that.

This simple truth is that if here in the Divine Service or out in the rest of life you are in any way, shape or form thinking you're pretty good before God because of something about you, you are doing so according to some reasoning based on the doctrines of men, meaning the folly of your own mind.

What we need to do is get unfocused from ourselves and what we do and refocused on Christ and what **He** does, is doing continually. **He** is declaring us Holy and righteous not because of what we've done, but because of what **He** has done with our sin—borne it to the grave, rendering it dead and powerless. **He** is interceding for us before the Father, rendering the accusations of Satan against us mute by **His** Word of forgiveness. The Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and Son is bringing us to faith, sustaining us in faith and, unless we think we're too good of a church folk to accept it, convicting us of our sins and bring us to Christ in repentance.

Jesus is doing all the grace and mercy of God in our midst, formally here in the Word and the Supper, but constantly everywhere as you stand in the Holy Baptism He did to you and humbly and thankfully submit to His mercy, not because you're good church folk, but because He is who He is, gracious God folk, mercifully showering His gifts on those who can't deserve or merit them.

This is a basic truth of the faith, but it certainly bears repeating and proclaiming, especially in light of the scary, scary thing Jesus says about these Pharisees caught up in their own self-justifying and self-righteous thinking and practices. He says they are *“making void the word of God by your tradition.”*

That's terrifying that it would be possible to do that. Don't be doing that. The Gospel Word of God's forgiveness is flying right at you in all the wonderful ways God gives it. Jesus is doing His grace thing in your midst. Don't be the “good church folk” who don't think they need it and aren't really seeking it. Be what you are, a needy beggar amazed at the Jesus who is here giving you the healing you need.

Amen.