

Christ Episcopal Church

2 Emerson Street

East Norwalk, Connecticut 06855

Sunday, September 2, 2018

Proper 17 (B)

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

DRAFT

“Cleanliness, but not godliness”

8 AM and 10 AM Sermons

by the Rev. Joe Parrish

The Holy Gospel according to

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze

kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’ You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.” Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is

nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

Dear Lord, give us clean hearts and merciful minds. Amen.

Doing something different is often a challenge for a church: should we welcome in the stranger if they do not have our middle class style? should the altar be free standing or back against the wall? should the candles be extinguished before the recession or after? why do we never have music? or why we almost never have a guitar? or why do we only have a guitar, a bass and a piano, and so on. Maybe we can find some particularity we love or dislike in church, and these things are perhaps pathways to God for us but they could be barriers to

God for others. Often these things are referred to as “style”—our church is ‘this style’ and not ‘that style’. Most people do not attend a church while they are on vacation because none of the nearby churches are our preferred ‘style’.

My first deadly sin in my previous church thirty years ago was that I moved the very historic free-standing baptismal font from the back corner where it had been for thirty years, up to the front where it had been for a hundred years before someone decided to move it to the dark back corner and hang a light over it.

The font had been given to the church in around 1780 by a Tory whose property had been seized during the Revolutionary War and who had returned to England to be ordained an Anglican priest during the American Revolution. The carved marble bowl was apparently some sort of ‘peace offering’ between those who had wealth and those who wanted more wealth in the original British colony of New Jersey. [The font had been saved from the original church which the Bishop had torn down in 1859 to make a cathedral

for his work since that church was in the middle of the state. After the Civil War, the state was split into two dioceses and the church ended up in the northern-most corner of the southern half of the old diocese.] One young couple left and became Lutherans. And one of their parents, a warden, never forgave us to his dying day.

The story is told about the clever young English vicar who wanted to move the church piano from the back of the church to the front. Every week he moved it one foot toward the front until

the year he retired when the piano finally made it to the front of the church. No one noticed the gradual change, but it took thirty years.

I was reading an interesting sermon by a Presbyterian minister which I thought was quite thorough in how it expounded on the Gospel. He was an up and coming new pastor with great credentials, but when I googled his name I discovered he had had an adulterous relationship from his first day at the church which nine months later caused

his very early retirement to become an employee at Lowes.

Congregational pastor Mickey Anders tells this story: “A young rabbi went to serve his first synagogue, and he noticed that on the first Sabbath, when he said the prayers, the congregation on the left side of the synagogue stood at the beginning of the prayers, and the congregation on the right side remained seated. The young rabbi thought this was a little odd but continued to say the prayers. After the first couple of petitions, he noticed a murmuring, which

intensified as he continued the prayers. Finally, it got loud enough that he was able to make out some of the words.

The murmuring in the congregation was a disagreement between the two halves of the congregation; the left half was saying that in this synagogue the tradition was that the congregation stood during the prayers, and the right half was saying that in this congregation the tradition was that they sat during the prayers.

As the prayers continued, the voices got louder, until finally the rabbi stopped

because he was sure that God was the only one who could hear him anymore.

Hoping that this event was due to having a new rabbi (and attempting to influence him), the young rabbi did not discuss it with anyone, but the next Sabbath, it happened again. The argument once again got so loud that the young rabbi stopped before he had finished his prayers – people were actually yelling at each other. The tone had gotten rancorous, and each side of the congregation started to engage in

accusations of heresy and other name-calling.

The young rabbi looked up the elderly rabbi who had served this congregation for years and told him what was going on. The question he asked at the end of his story was, “So is it the tradition of the congregation to stand during the prayers?”

The older rabbi stroked his beard and replied, “No, that has never been the tradition of that congregation.”

“So, the tradition is that they remain sitting during the prayers?”

The older rabbi looked off into the distance, as if remembering the good years serving God as a rabbi and said, “No, that was never the tradition of that congregation either.”

The young rabbi threw his hands in the air in exasperation, and said, “There must be some solution to this! The way things are now, they just end up screaming at each other during the prayers.”

The old rabbi’s face lit up in a smile as he lifted an admonishing finger to the

sky and said, “Yes! That was our tradition!”

<https://www.sermonwriter.com/sermons/mark-71-8-14-15-21-23-clean-hands-clean-heart-anders/>

Our hearts are often hardened by the world and having to work with those whose ethics are far from ours. Church becomes a sort of respite, a safe-haven, where we can regain our composure and head back to that unforgiving world.

God will use us in miraculous ways if we become quiet and simply listen to God for guidance, softening our hearts to

hear the cries of the poor and oppressed around us. We are the sheep of God's pasture and maybe we are the lost lamb Jesus Christ put over his shoulder to bring us back to safety. When we find that comfort in God's arms, may we share our newly wakened Spirit and love with the hardened world so that others may find their rest in God's bosom as well. Amen.

Description: We interact with many whose lives are torn by strife. May we be peace makers for others.

Tags:

Anglican, Presbyterian, Lowes, adultery, pastor, rabbi, young, old, piano, bass, guitar, altar, vicar, oppressed, poor, middle-class, style, vacation, church, font, baptismal, Revolutionary, War, Tory, peace, offering

St. Stephen's Episcopal ProCathedral

35 S. Franklin Street

Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania 17201

The Fourteenth Sunday after

Pentecost: Proper 17B

August 30, 2015

DRAFT

Open arms, open hearts

A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish

The Holy Gospel according to

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze

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Think back to 9-11. How many have had to take off their shoes when going to board an airplane? Or how do we view those who wear head coverings, birkas on women or turbans on men? Did 9-11 change our perceptions?

When the Gospel according to Mark was being written, around 70 AD, the burning and complete destruction of Jerusalem and its sacred temple were still very much on the minds of those who had suffered through that tragedy. The Romans had decimated the Sadducees and desecrated all the Holy Parts of the

Temple in 70 AD. The religious Jews were in complete disarray. There was no longer a Great High Priest, if any priests at all, since the sacred precincts where they served were now all gone in 70 AD as this gospel was being written down. It was perhaps an even more tumultuous time for Christians, as they had likely recently become excluded from worshipping in some synagogues which they had done for two decades prior to the fall of Jerusalem and possibly even before that time in some areas of Israel and surrounds. But the story about the

man being born blind which is told in the Gospel of John in Chapter Nine only thinly disguises the fact that around 90 AD the Jews finally universally developed and added an anathematic prayer against those who worshipped Jesus Christ. The Jewish daily prayers included a line that pronounced a curse on those who worshipped Jesus. So as this Gospel of Mark was being written, Christians as well as Jews were searching for places to hold their prayer and worship services, and some were just worshipping out of doors when the

climate was good or inside private homes. If you visit the Greek city of Corinth today you can see one of those ancient homes that may have transitioned into a tiny church near the Roman pagan temple. And even as early as the AD fifties and sixties Corinth still had a well-known temple of prostitutes high up on the mountain beside Corinth which is called “Acro-Corinth”. Paul railed against that sort of worship, which could have included prostitutes of both sexes. And sad to say, underground New York has similar sites even today. We are not

that far from pagan Greece and Rome, and some think we may have outdone them by putting up sordid websites focusing on adulterous relations.

So religious Jews had a lot to be separated from in their middle Eastern cultures, and to keep their adherents “pure” and safe the Pharisaical leaders drew upon a number of ancient practices to identify how their Jewish members were still separated from the sordid world.

The problem for Christians was that they were probably equally circumspect

in their mixings with the pagan world, but they had only two sacred rites, baptism and Eucharist. Washings and cleansings were not a part of the rest of their day to day lives as they were for the religious Jews, so the Jews identified Christians as being just as corrupt as pagans. And today's gospel gives an overview of how the two religious groups interacted; perhaps a similar debate would occur today between Christians and Mormons. We respect each other, but we look askance at how we each 'enact' our religious faith—one

much more conservative, if I may use that word for Mormons, and the other, Christians, being more ‘liberal’ religiously even if they are ideologically conservative. Christians would not deign to baptize people for the hope of saving a person already dead, even though it is indeed approved in our scriptures, and GLBTQ married couples would likely not be welcomed into the Mormon Temple.

But at our recent General Convention we all were the most cordial of all people in Salt Lake City, Episcopalians and

Mormons, in spite of our differences which were so obvious at the July Convention. And indeed, the Mormons entertained us royally—with their own choirs and singing groups as well as indigenous Utah dance groups.

So I assume God could have different heavens for us to occupy, or different rooms in heaven! But surely there is detente in heaven since sexuality is only a transient earthly phenomenon, according to Christ.

But we Christians know how to exclude probably as well as did the first

century Jews. Only maybe one in twenty churches has a good welcoming program for visitors, in my experience. The rest are pretty much standoffish and treat our churches as more of a club than as a gathering of Christ's believers. It is not easy to break ourselves from this trait. My home church, a Southern Baptist church, did ask me to lead a prayer at their weekday Bible study a few years back, but no way was I invited to teach, unlike in Jesus' day when any visiting rabbi was expected to do a homily in the synagogue in the late third decade AD.

Of course, at Jesus' inaugural attempt at preaching, the congregation tried to throw him off the Nazareth cliff! We can tolerate a visitor, but don't let them critique our services! although oftentimes the visitors' comments are the most honest of all.

Twenty years ago in another diocese, our new bishop said that if we baptize someone, then all the other sacramental rites should be available to them. At that time the issue was ordaining gay people. However, twenty years later, his views were completely accepted by their

representatives to General Convention which did include a gay priest or two. On the surface at least, pharisaical influences are no longer the rule. But for any of us who think we have overcome pharisaism, we probably have not been sufficiently tested. It's always too comfortable to be a judge, isn't it?!

So as we look down on the quaintness of the Pharisees of Jesus' time in today's gospel, we move into our own crosshairs as fragile human beings. We cluster with 'our own'. We converse with our

friends. We include our acquaintances, but the stranger we stand off from.

So, let us see how we can change our own behavior.

Did you see someone whose name you do not know? Go over and introduce yourself at the Peace. Don't be strangers to each other. When I first came to my church in Elizabeth, New Jersey, I stood at the exit door and greeted people as I was expected to do. But being a bit of an activist, I began asking each person if they knew the name of the person behind them in the

greeting line. And, guess what? They oftentimes didn't. Natalie came by first, and I asked her how many years she had gone to that church. Thirty-four, 34 years. And the next person, Russell, I asked if he knew Natalie? And being a very honest person, he said he had seen her in church, but he did not know her name. And when I asked Russell how long he had come to that church, he replied, thirty-six, 36 years. I cite this not as an example of what we are to do, but as an example of what we are not to do, in case you didn't get my drift!

Don't be afraid to ask someone a dozen times what is their name until you have it in memory. Try to associate something in their name with someone else you know with the same name. Or associate their name with their face in some way. If his name is Tom, then maybe look at his thumb and think, "Tom Thumb" or some equally ridiculous connection. But try to recall names using whatever trick it may require. Bring a pen and write it down. Introduce them to someone we do know by using their name—that helps, and perhaps the person to whom you

introduced them will help you remember that person's name.

A personal aside: Jesus said, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.'" "

I did not become an Episcopalian early on because of that very problem. When I was a junior in High School, our group of Key Clubbers, a high school group sponsored by the Kiwanis Club, our High School group sponsored visitations

to each other's churches once a month. One Sunday I went to the Episcopal Church where our Key Club president worshipped, now a cathedral, but I did not know anything about kneelers, and it put me off a bit when I saw others kneeling. Baptists look on that sort of thing as 'Catholick'. So, I sat, instead of kneeling. Right after the service a younger Episcopal classmate came over and excoriated me for not kneeling. And I said to myself, 'I'll never go to that kind of church again!'

However, as you may recognize, I am now an ordained Episcopal priest, but I am very liberal in dictating a person's posture at any part of our church services. If standing is your custom, please stand, even if everyone else is kneeling. If you kneel, do not feel obligated to stand even if everyone else in your row is standing, and so on. The only difference I would suggest not doing, is not following you neighbor in just clicking the bottom of the offering plate instead of putting something into it!! God loves a cheerful giver, so smile

at your clicking neighbor as you drop that big bill or check into the plate. No, no, I'm just kidding!

[And don't do this—two fingers at your eyes that then point to the other person.]

I believe we are called to break down barriers in church, and not erect new ones. When we were in England, no one moved unless the Virger, spelled V-I-R-G-E-R, led anyone who was moving from the congregation to the prayer podium, or from the clergy booths to the podium, where they were to read. No

one was to move on their own in the Winchester Cathedral in England. And if the Virger said a part of the Cathedral was closed to the public at a certain time, that was law, and that part of the Cathedral became 'off limits'. So Virgers in England had a much more controlling prominence than they do here in the States, as least in Winchester cathedral, and I suspect the same pertains in other English cathedrals.

But we are to be sure our customs, which may indeed be both quaint and useful, are not barring anyone from the

presence of God. We have to be on our guard, not against any stranger, but against our own selves not to become judge, jury, and executioner. None of those roles should be ours in church nor in the Kingdom of God.

Let us accept each other with open arms and always with a forgiving heart. For then we will be the true children of the One who wants to save us all, Jesus the Christ.

Amen.