

15 Pentecost, Proper 17, Yr. B

September 2, 2018

James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8. 14-15. 21-23

Both James and Mark are concerned about true religion. It's a perennial problem. They addressed it in the first century, the prophets addressed long before that and the problem is still with us today. One contemporary commentator has said that there is no greater religious peril than mistaking outward religious observance for true religion. James is pretty clear – don't just HEAR, he says, but DO something with what you've heard. And then he goes on to define true religion, in that last sentence: to care for orphans and widow and to keep oneself unstained by the world. Caring for orphans and widows in James' day translates in our time to caring for those who are marginalized, voiceless, powerless. Caring for those who are vulnerable among us. If you're not doing that, he goes so far as to say that your religion is worthless.

True religion is what's at the heart of Mark's gospel as well. A little background is helpful here. At issue is the oral law that had been developed in Israel. The Pharisees were so zealous about wanting to keep the 613 commandments written in the Torah that they developed an additional set of laws, from 100 to 1500 depending on how you were counting, that acted as a hedge around the Torah. Kind of an early warning system to keep people from breaking the laws of God. The system would have looked like concentric circles. In the very middle was the central command to love God with your whole heart and your neighbor as yourself. Surrounding that would be the commands in the Torah and then the outer ring would be these additional commands in the oral law. The latter two were designed to flesh-out, to facilitate obedience to those central commands of love. The end result was supposed to be that the human heart, transformed by the love of God, would issue in love of neighbor.

But humans being what we are, it is often easier to obey the letter of the law, in this case the traditions of the elders – to follow the rules and rituals, the outer observances – than to subject ourselves to any real transformation. Buddhists talk about something similar when they caution

practitioners not to mistake the finger that's pointing at the moon, for the moon itself. Don't get caught up with looking at the finger: to whom does it belong? what color is it? how big is it? are the nails clear and trimmed?. You get the idea. Across traditions, there's always the danger of substituting the rules for the real thing.

I have two examples of this. The first one is from my early years. I remember being told that a plenary indulgence (remember indulgences, which caused so many problems? You did something and shaved years off your sentence, so to speak – a PLENARY indulgence, as I remember, forgave EVERYTHING). All you had to do was go into church and say the prescribed number of prayers and that was it. As I recall, I spend my school lunch hour, going in and out of church, saying the right number of prayers, accumulating who knows how many years of credit! The second is a contemporary example, told by one of our summer parishioners who is active in a food ministry in Kansas. The ministry is supported by area churches and feeds over 300 people once a week. As you might imagine they need a lot of support, both financially and for willing volunteers. At one point the atheist community in town asked if they could help. When the majority of churches gladly accepted them, some of the conservative churches quit. The atheists were willing to do the loving thing, but because their philosophy differed, some were unable to accept their loving actions.

While James thinks that we remain unstained by the world if we don't live according to the world's values, the Pharisaic system taught that there had to be a real separation from the world to remain unstained. Their tradition held that they needed to be completely separate from things that would make them unworthy to stand before God – the question of what was clean and unclean had nothing to do with hygiene but everything to do with cultic cleanliness. Primarily there were the dietary laws, which are the subject of today's Gospel, the laws about keeping the Sabbath and circumcision. It's worth noting that the emphasis on these things grew up during the period of exile and they were designed, in addition to being part of that hedge I spoke about earlier, to help the Israelites keep their identity, to avoid being assimilated into the cultures surrounding them. So these rules were put in place with the best of intentions but what Christ is asking is for us to go

beyond those rules – to have not just ritually clean hands, but hearts that have been transformed by the love of God and that can, because of that, show love to the neighbor.

Can we get caught in this? This looking at ourselves in a mirror and then wandering away, forgetting what we look like, what we're called to be? I think the answer is absolutely yes. We can get caught because in many ways rules can be attractive. They give us clarity and certainty. Rules set limits – you must do this much, but you don't have to do any more than that. With rules, the requirements for a good life aren't open-ended. You can reach a point where you can sit back and say, I've done enough. Rules satisfy the "bean-counter" in all of us. Speaking of bean-counters, do you remember the story about P.T. Barnum who was on his death bed and was furiously reading the Bible. When asked if he'd got religion, he replied that he was looking for the loopholes. One of the commentators I read in preparation for this sermon had been raised in a Bible church. He said that, in the pews, were offering envelopes – there was a place for your name and the amount, but also 5 boxes to be checked. One was whether you brought your Bible to church, another was whether you had read it during the week, one had to do with whether you were making an offering. He said that he worked hard to be able to check all the boxes and Bible visibility was a big thing – the bigger, the better, the more tattered and dog-eared, the more impressive. He remembers one day a fellow came in with no Bible and he leaned over and whispered to his father, "He must be a Presbyterian." (You could have substituted Episcopalian for that, I think.) Both James and Jesus would undoubtedly suggest that we need a few more boxes to check.

Jesus is doing something else in this gospel; he's pointing out that it's not the action that counts – it's the intention. What's in your heart is what matters. Those clean hearts that we pray for every time we come together for Eucharist. "Cleanse our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit that we may perfectly love you..." we're praying for that Sunday after Sunday. So for Jesus, what's in your heart is what matters. You'll remember that elsewhere in the Gospel he says, "You have heard that you shall not kill, but I say to you, you can't even be angry with your brother in your heart."

It's an interesting contrast with society laws – there only the action counts. You may have formed every intention of robbing a bank but get a flat tire on the way and can't get there. There's no legal consequence whatsoever, but the intent, the motive, the desire was there and your heart would have been defiled by them. The difference is that society cares about peaceful relationships, while God cares not only about that, but also about the transformation of our hearts. Speaking of this contrast between rules and laws on the one hand and love on the other, there's a great story about Mayor LaGuardia. The story is that he was presiding at night court one evening and a desperately poor woman was brought in; she had been caught stealing two loaves of bread. There was no doubt that she had done so. The mayor found her guilty and imposed a fine, but then immediately looked at the courtroom full of lawyers, police officers and news reporters and then said that he was fining everyone in the courtroom for living in a city where theft of bread was necessary for the poor and he began that payment with himself. Those in attendance collected enough to pay the woman's fine (and hopefully, to buy more bread.)

In the context of food, Jesus says that what goes into our bodies doesn't matter (which would, by the way, have been a really startling claim to Jewish people). But if we take that thought and play with it a bit, we can see that what goes into our hearts and minds in the form of ideas or influences, or the experiences we have in our various environments – those things do matter. For instance, I don't think it's possible to be a constant consumer of media violence without having that become a part of our attitudes.

Last Thursday, the group doing the Empire series talked a bit about Fred Rogers and the documentary about his life that's been produced. In small, quiet, kind ways, he made a difference in the lives of countless children. He hated those shows with violent content being marketed to children. And in that way, we're back to what we talked about a couple of weeks ago – just practicing acts of kindness whenever we can.

So, where are we? Needing to do some self-reflection, perhaps. Checking what influences we're taking in and how they are forming us, but also

checking to be sure that we're not just worried about outward conformity to rules but are instead on the blessed pathway to the transformation of our hearts. Amen.