

August 25, 2024

Mark 7:1-13

“No Other Savior but the Lord!”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
2155 North Oakland Ave.
Decatur, Illinois 62526

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I think that most of us would agree that washing our hands and keeping them clean is important to our overall physical well-being. But washing our hands and keeping them clean is unimportant when you consider the importance of a clean heart and a healthy relationship with God. Our gospel lesson sets before us an odd way of looking at things. When the Pharisees and some of the scribes saw that Jesus' disciples ate with unwashed hands, they asked Jesus: "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" You see, these religious leaders believed that by following the traditions of their forefathers they could please God, live an undefiled life before him, and even save themselves.

It is strange that anyone would think that human traditions could somehow save us. But when you think a bit harder you begin to see that humans tend to think that way. Take, for example, the whole idea of saving the planet and ourselves. People are trying to make up a host of new traditions (new ways of living) that must be followed to save ourselves from ourselves and the certain doom of this world. These new human traditions are clashing with old traditions. The old ways of living are under attack by the new ways of living. Some people are not only upset but even hostile when you do not follow their traditions. As Christians we realize that we are caretakers of what God has given us in the creation, but we certainly do not see ourselves as saviors.

Well, I really don't want to get into a further discussion about saving the planet - a planet that will inevitably wear out like a piece of clothing, according the prophet Isaiah. The point is that our text is not as odd as one might think. Humans love their traditions - their ways of living. What is more important for our discussion is what is behind all of this. Without true knowledge and faith in God there is nothing in us but self-interest. We love ourselves for the purpose of ourselves. Thus we are able to convince ourselves that by following our ways of living we will save ourselves from loss of self as if this is really in our power. Such thinking ends up in an attitude of superiority where we insist upon our human conceived ways on others which leads to exhausting arguments with those who are labeled as inferior. But the bottom line is that all humility before God is lost. Humans are arrogant. Humanity never ceases to take the role of God as creator, preserver, savior, and purifier of all things messed up down here.

That's exactly what the Pharisees and some of the scribes were doing in our text for today. And this can happen in the New Testament church as well on many different levels if we are not exceedingly careful. We can create our own traditions (or ways of living) and find fault and look down on others because they do not meet whatever traditions that we have made for ourselves and them. What we fail to realize, in all of this, is our commonality. Apart from God we are nothing and have nothing. God is good and the fountain of all goodness and we, with the whole unbelieving world, are nothing but beggars before him who made us. Only he has the insight and power to straighten what is crooked. We need the cross of Jesus.

In our gospel lesson we read the following: And he [Jesus] said to them, "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.” Those are super strong words that no one really wants to hear as they need to be heard. The danger is that we can embrace a lot of “God talk” without having God. And if our God talk is godless then we do not really have God. And if we really do not have God then we are truly left with ourselves. And isn’t that what the whole world is relying on? Are we not in danger of relying on ourselves and our ways of living (our human traditions) to save ourselves? Have we left the commandments of God to hold to the traditions of people? Have we left Jesus, who is the way, and who has obeyed all the commandments for us that we may be declared righteous by faith in him and thereby journey to heaven?

Jesus is quoting the twenty-ninth chapter of Isaiah, and it might be worth considering the context of this passage for just a moment without going into great detail. In general, the Lord God had imparted his message of undeserved kindness to the people in the forgiveness of sins that comes from the promise of the Savior. They saw the works of his salvation. Nevertheless, they developed calloused hearts and followed after their own human ways. They went into a deep sleep - eyes closed - and the Word of God became for them a sealed book - an unreadable book.

That was the day of Isaiah. It was the day of Jesus. And we see it in our day. The gift has arrived in the forgiveness of sins, but people pursue what they have made up - their own way of living. They make for themselves their own thoughts and rules for their salvation. They have fully embraced the thoughts of human beings instead of the words of God and his glorious salvation in Jesus Christ. All of this forces us to examine our own walk with God and his Son. Is it possible that we have lost sight of what is really important? Have we allowed our human thoughts and rules to crowd out God’s Word from its proper place? And how have we turned this against others so that the gospel is lost for them?

Our text for this morning goes on and points out a very important truth. The wrongness of the approach of the religious leaders of Jesus’ day is observed and felt in the horrible results. Replacing God’s Word with human words and following human ways of living rather than God’s Word results in a life lived only for the self. It becomes a loveless life. When we dishonor God’s gospel of salvation in Jesus, and neglect his powerful pardon for all of our sins, and fail then to be motivated to love as we have been loved, there are harsh consequences. Listen to what our lesson says:

And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban”’ (that is, given to God) - then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.”

What first strikes me in these words of Jesus are the sad results of following human ways rather than God’s ways. Rejecting the commandments of God, such as the commandment to honor your father and mother, and replacing it with human ways of thinking, overturns true love for father and mother as it is to be lived. This is what human laws do because they usually come from selfish desires. They do not support

love for others but they support love for self and wreck society. And isn't that exactly what we are seeing in our country as human ways of living are overturning the ways of our Lord? Our society is becoming an unmitigated wreck! The society, at the time of Jesus, crucified our Lord because he was the way, the truth, and the life. Sin increased sin until God allowed Judah and Jerusalem to be destroyed by the Romans. One Lutheran preacher makes the following observation:

When our own voices and no others guide us, when our hearts are filled with self and far from God, even those dearest to us will suffer the consequences. Instead of gratitude, honor, obedience, and love toward those who have endured pain and deprivation to give us life, we look for excuses and loopholes so that we can be free of the burden of caring for our parents. Though the particulars of this example may be hard for us to reconstruct, Jesus' concluding "and many such things" shows that this is merely one example among many of what life turned in upon itself looks like.

At the beginning of the message I said: "I think that most of us would agree that washing our hands and keeping them clean is important to our overall physical well-being. But washing our hands and keeping them clean is unimportant when you consider the importance of a clean heart and a healthy relationship with God." Jesus has suffered death to wash away the stain of sin from our souls. He cleanses us of our self love to his love for us that we may love one another. Jesus has risen from the dead that we might walk in newness of life and look forward to the end of this mess and a new beginning. Why do we not walk in the traditions of men and clean our own hands? Because we are made clean in Jesus who is the only true Savior. The dirt we bring is removed only by the cross of Jesus to which we cling. As the Lord says in Isaiah 43:11, "I, I am the Lord, and besides me there is no savior."

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott