

Arvada
United Methodist Church

August 30, 2009

From the Heart
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Rev. Rusty Butler

I don't know if you know how Valerie and I decide when each of us is going to preach and when we are going to not preach... and about which topics. But for the Summer time we sat down back in March or April, and decided this is our schedule for the next few months and this is what we are going to address, so on and so forth. I knew today would be the day when we would be thinking about starting new education classes, thinking about New Sunday School topics and it so happened that a couple of months ago we decided that this would be the day when we passed out the New Horizon's booklet, so it was all geared to education. And I thought to myself as I looked at the scripture back in March or April oh this will be easy. I thought the scripture simply said, what comes out of us depends on what goes in...

So I came to this week and I started in with the scripture again...imagine my surprise when the text didn't line up with what I thought I was going to preach about! That will stop you!

It's always a shocker when what you think Jesus said, doesn't match up to what is there. What he said is, "It is not what goes in that defiles...but instead what comes out is what defiles."

All that means is that I had to start over again from the top! Sometimes that is a good thing!

Would you pray with me?

O God, keep shocking us with new understandings of our misunderstandings, open us up to the truth of the ages and to the truth of a new day. Amen.

On Thursday, I did a Memorial service out at Red Rocks for the victim of a senseless and tragic car accident. She was a 36 year old mother of a three year old and the daughter of one of our members, the sister of the young women who was in the youth group back in the nineties. It was one of the saddest services I've ever been to...just heartbreaking. After the service was over, I was standing off to the side and a woman came over to me. I think she wanted to say something nice to me about the service. What she said was, "I'm glad you brought Jesus to the service." And I thought to myself, now that is an interesting thing to say. And I've been trained in pastoral counseling...and so I said, "Oh?" Because you see, if I think about what Jesus would bring to the service, he probably wouldn't have just said, I will be enough...but he would bring words to comfort, or a touch to heal, or perhaps even tears to share the grief.

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What I had done was mention that Jesus wept upon hearing that his friend Lazarus had died and that he knew what it was to lose someone so close. So this lady kind of took that and ran with it. That was fine; each of us was trying to find something comforting along the way. The implication though from her voice and her body language was that had I not brought Jesus to the service, it wouldn't have been good or right...that something would have been wrong about what happened at the service.

In a similar manner, the Pharisees approach Jesus and they notice that some of the disciples were eating without washing their hands. You see they weren't doing things right...according to the Pharisees.

Now I want to give you just a little background on this because I think it's important to our understanding of the story. And the background story starts about 600 years before the time of Jesus. It was at that time that our spiritual ancestors the Jewish people of Israel believed that they were the chosen people of God and that God would not let them down. They understood that God was in the temple in Jerusalem and that God would never let anything happen to Jerusalem and for that matter wouldn't let anything happen to them either as a people. But something did happen, Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians and the temple was destroyed. Many of the people were taken away into exile. As you can imagine that was a blow to the idea that God was protecting them.

When the remnant returned to Israel some fifty years later...just a few old men and women who could remember and of course the next generation who had come into being, they all had to figure out what all that meant. They came up with the idea that they had failed God in some way. But what way was it? There were a number of theories but two of the main ones were put forth by Isaiah and by two other prophets named Ezra and Nehemiah. Isaiah suggested the problem was that God's people had become isolated from the world and its problems. Ezra and Nehemiah argued that God's interest is in purity and in keeping people undefiled by the world. Its avoidance of the uncleanly that pleases God, that's what they determined.

It was not an easy debate, and it still goes on. Is the church primarily holy space, separate from the world in its confusion or is the church a launching pad for service and a gathering place for the lost and the least? Do we come to church to get away from the world or to get into the world in new ways? Is the business of the church to take care of its own or to risk getting tangled up with others?

Good questions, not easy questions either by the way. I can't tell you how much easier it is to think about taking care of our own rather than having to meet and hear the stories of those people who are down and out and needing help and then figure out how to respond.

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At any rate, Ezra and Nehemiah's argument carried the day. The more you followed the rituals, the more you were different...and hence, the holier you were. That is the religion and the world into which Jesus was born. And when Jesus began his public ministry do you remember who he quoted from? Yes, you are right Isaiah...who had lost the argument all those years before. Jesus chose that message that says he is sent to preach good news to the poor, to bind up the broken hearted, to preach to the captives, restore sight to the blind, and set free those who suffer.

Purity over involvement wasn't the way to go. Instead it should be service over ritual. You think the Pharisees had some trouble with that?

You are right.

But the question still comes to us...What does God expect of us? What do faithful people do to be faithful?

For the lady that came up to me after the Memorial service was over, a faithful rendering had to include the mention of Jesus or stories about Jesus. That was important for her. On the other hand, one of the teachers from Ralston Valley was there and was talking to my son David later that night about the service and said to him...she didn't know David was my son, she started talking about a service she had been to at Red Rocks for a young woman and she said, the service was good, the pastor said the right things...not too religious. And David, my son said, my Dad did that service.

What do faithful people need to do to be faithful? We must keep asking ourselves that question. For the Pharisees it was keeping pure, for the disciples following Jesus, purity wasn't the top priority something else took precedence. Do we have to say certain words? Do certain things? Is that what it means to be faithful?

Sometimes people get upset about the dress of some folks at church...shorts, or skirts all that jazz. I think you are pretty good about letting people be people. But I have a friend who is a pastor who happens to dress pretty casually during church...in July, she got a new appointment in Wyoming of all places. And she is just so good, but she dresses pretty casual so she got letters from the congregation to her D.S. the first week she was in her new appointment...they complained about her choice of dress. What do faithful people do to be faithful? Do they have to wear certain clothes to be faithful?

The Catholic church is going through this thing...you may have read about that a few weeks ago...it struck me as funny.

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During the June 14 Evening Mass at the Cathedral Basilica of the Immaculate Conception, Denver Archbishop Charles Chaput used his homily to address the topic of skimpy dress.

"I think the Lord is always displeased if we dress immodestly," Chaput said. "We should be modest in our dress everywhere, especially in church."

"I suspect [the Lord is] indifferent if we just dress casually," he said.

Isn't that funny? Can I tell you something, I doubt very much that anyone knows whether the Lord is pleased or displeased by someone's dress.

What do faithful people do to be faithful?

Follow rituals?

Ritual has its place. When we repeat things such as the Lord's prayer that is fine. But what happens sometimes is that because we know the rituals are so important, we strive to perfect them and then before we know it, we are more concerned with form than with content. And when form becomes formalized and content is forgotten, ritual turns into ritualism.

Father David Steindl-Rast suggests that every ritual in the world celebrates belonging in one form or another.

The Pharisees were wondering if Jesus' disciples did not follow the ritual which they did, would the disciples and Jesus still consider themselves a part of the Jewish people? It seems that what Jesus suggested was that this expression of washing one's hands which one group would do, prevents another group from feeling as if they belong.

He saw something wrong in that and called the Pharisees to account.

Monday night we are going to gather as a group, the people who are there love this church - some more, some less, but it will be important enough for them to be there and so we will be saying I love this church enough that I see it must release itself to be itself, which is the way that it will become important to the next generations.

Some of you have been to Hawaii and have walked on lava flows...I haven't got to do that and it seems dangerous but I've seen people do it on TV. But it seems to me that religion is something like that...First there is the red hot fire of those who experience the holy, like Jesus or Paul or maybe the disciples. They become a spark and a fire and they light up the world. They are lit up. But the hot lava flows farther and farther away from the source, and as it does so the cooler it gets and pretty soon the lava hardens into

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rock...I think that is like the institution of the church...if the hardened lava could think it would think that it is the important stuff...but everyone knows that in the lava flows you will still find in the fissures and clefts...hot springs, geysers, places where the lava still flows or is so near the surface it is threatening to come through.

It's like that with the church. We have to be careful that we keep looking for the hot spots, trying to find where the fire and the light and the heat are. So every generation is challenged anew to make its religion truly like fire.

What do faithful people do to be faithful?