

14th Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary 22 (B)
August 29, 2021
Text: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

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This week, I found myself thinking about three classmates from elementary school. There was Chuck, who never brushed his teeth. There was Bob, who picked his nose. And there was Paul, who was overweight and wore thick glasses. All three of them were on the wrong side of the social divide in grade school, and I saw how nasty and cruel other kids were to them. They were targets for ridicule and exclusion and abuse. It was as if they had been labeled “NOT OK.” I felt sad for them, but I didn’t go out of my way to make friends with them because I didn’t want to be labeled “NOT OK” too.

In the first century, in Jesus’ culture, there were also ways of distinguishing who was OK and who wasn’t. There was a whole system of rituals and purity laws in the Hebrew Bible that served as a kind of anchor for Jewish identity. For example, as a faithful Jewish person, you would eat only kosher food, you would observe the Sabbath by refraining from work, and if you were male, you were circumcised. These were the essential faith practices that defined who was “in” and who was “out” of the faith community, who was OK and who was NOT OK. These practices served as social boundary markers that identified who to welcome to your table and who to exclude.

In addition to these faith practices that came directly from the Law of Moses, there were also traditions that not only expanded the list of rules to obey, but also expanded the circle of people who were NOT OK. For example, at the heart of the dispute in our gospel story today was the tradition of washing hands before you eat. It sounds sensible, but in this case it’s not a hygiene issue. The religious leaders didn’t approach Jesus because some of his followers were eating with dirty hands. It was a religious issue. The tradition of ceremonially washing one’s hands was an extension of religious law. In the temple, there was a great basin of water, and the Law required the priests to wash their hands in order to be ritually clean when they did their priestly work. And it’s easy to imagine how the tradition grew—if the priests wash their hands to be ritually clean, and if all of Israel is to be God’s priestly nation, then there should be a ritual for all of God’s people to wash their hands and be ritually clean.

But here’s the rub. For many of the great mass of poor people, it was nearly impossible to keep all of those traditional rituals. If you were a peasant farmer, or a fisherman, or a shepherd, you were bound to run afoul of something that the religious leaders required. That meant you would be on the wrong side of the social boundary that marked who was “in” and who was “out.” You would be NOT OK. And that’s why Jesus calls the religious leaders hypocrites. They were making a big deal of little things, little human traditions, while ignoring things that really matter, like mercy and compassion, or justice for the poor. They were all about things that were superficial, like ritually washing hands, but were oblivious to the ways those very traditions undermined the community of God’s people by marginalizing the poor.

Now, we might be tempted to dismiss this whole debate as arcane, as nothing more than an historical oddity that has carries no importance for our lives. But my classmates in grade school, Chuck and Bob and Paul, they would know better. They would know that anything used to exclude and demean others is not OK. They would have appreciated the conclusion that is implicit in Jesus' words, that religious rules and traditions and customs should serve only one purpose—helping us love each other. That is the heart of being people of God: love God with your whole heart and love your neighbor as yourself. They would have appreciated how Jesus saw life with God—it's all about healing the human family, about forgiveness and restoring relationships. Life with God is about making our lives and our communities whole. Life with God is about caring for neighbors in need and working to bring justice to our common life. Life with God is about finding our way through this confusing world with love and compassion and generosity.

Perhaps most of all my classmates would have appreciated how Jesus' vision for life became evident in not just his words, but his actions. So Jesus touched a leper to heal him. Jesus wasn't concerned that the leper would cause him to become ritually unclean because the healing power of God's love went the other way. With his touch, Jesus healed the leper and made him clean. Jesus touched a corpse to raise a little girl back to life. He wasn't concerned that her corpse would make him ritually unclean because the power of God's love went the other way. With his touch, Jesus raised the little girl back to life and made her clean. Jesus was concerned first of all with the needs of the people who came to him. He ate with sinners and other "unacceptable" people. He interacted with foreigners and crossed all sorts of traditional boundaries because that's what love required. And in the end, Jesus crossed over the boundary of death—for us—because that's what love required. And on the third day God raised him to new life—because that's what God's love does.

It turns out that this ancient dispute about washing hands is tremendously applicable to our time and our struggles. We may not use the words "clean" and "unclean," but there are social and political boundary markers in our society that create deep and painful divisions, that establish in-groups and out-groups, that render some people OK and others definitely NOT OK. It feels like we're living through a time when every single point of difference between people—skin color or ethnic ancestry, sexual orientation or gender identity, economic status, political or religious affiliation—can become a red hot boundary marker. Even whether you choose to wear a mask during the middle of a global pandemic has become an identity marker as much as a public health tool. On the one hand, I see people of goodwill doing their best to become aware and be allies and advocates, to cross over those boundaries and recognize the harm that has been done to communities of color, to LGBTQ people. But on the other hand, I also see voices and influencers who ridicule these efforts, who use these very differences to drive a wedge, to increase division, to fuel hatred and judgment for personal gain and notoriety and power. Make no mistake, it is big business. Stoking division and dividing people is quite profitable to some.

We desperately need the wisdom Jesus has to give us. Jesus would have us recognize that it isn't the differences as such that are the source of our troubles. The problems come from within us—all of us, not just "those people" on the other side of the boundary. That's why Jesus

calls us to pay attention to those things that come out of the human heart that are so corrosive to community—hate, envy, selfishness, greed and anything else that allows people to see others as “less than,” and treat them as nothing more than instruments of their desires or obstacles in their way. The wisdom Jesus gives is wisdom for living a truly human, truly whole and humane, life.

And this isn't a work we accomplish all on our own. It is first of all the work of God's Spirit in us, transforming us; creating in us clean hearts—hearts that love God and love our neighbor; hearts that seek the way of compassion and mercy. And it is particularly in community, in *this* community, called by the name of Jesus, that the Spirit is teaching us the way of Jesus, growing his vision for life in our hearts and minds. This vision for life grows first from receiving. So in this community, there is room here for all of God's children— it doesn't matter how much money you have. It doesn't matter what color you skin is. It doesn't matter who you love. It doesn't matter whether you've made some disastrous mistakes in life that have taken you into addiction or bankruptcy or prison. It doesn't matter whether the world looks at you as a winner or a loser, there is room here for all of God's children, there is love and forgiveness and compassion for all of God's children, including my grade school classmates, Chuck and Bob and Paul—because we do not belong to God by virtue of keeping all the rules or being good, pious believers. It is only by grace, only by God's mercy, God's undeserved goodness, that we have been welcomed into the arms of Jesus, gathered into the family of God, made part of the future God is creating for the whole human family. Thanks be to God. Amen