

What Makes the Faithful, Truly Faithful?

Mark 7:1-13

Pentecost 14, Proper 16-B -- August 26, 2018

Well here we are now, once again back in St. Mark's Gospel, after we have spent the past two weeks listening to Jesus' powerful discourse **FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL** about his being: *"The Bread of Life come down from heaven to give life to the world" (John 6:35, 41)!*

Today, as we revisit **Mark's Gospel**, at the beginning of **chapter 7**, we do so again on the **northern shores of the Sea of Galilee**. But this time, we are not meeting Jesus in **CAPERNAUM**, where we've seen him several times before, but now we are meeting him in another coastal town known as **Genneserat**; located on the **NORTHWESTERN SHORE OF THE SEA OF GALILEE**; a very lovely place; highly populated because of its two very important **TWIN INDUSTRIES: FIRST, AGRICULTURE** (the Farming Industry) and **SECONDLY, the COMMERCIAL FISHING BUSINESS**.

At the end of chapter 6 St Mark tells us that by this time Jesus' **POPULARITY HAD RISEN SHARPLY AMONG THE GENERAL PUBLIC**. Mark tells us that immediately after Jesus stepped off of the boat there in Genneserat: *"The people immediately recognized him and ran about the whole region and began to bring the sick people on their beds to wherever they heard he was.*

And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or countryside, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and implored him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment and as many as touched it were made well" (Mark 6:54-56)!

Well, for as long this lasted, it must have been a very lovely time for Jesus and his disciples, but wouldn't you know it, all of a sudden, a **DELEGATION OF RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES FROM THE TEMPLE IN JERUSALEM** arrives there also, uninvited, who far from being wholeheartedly enthusiastic about being in Jesus' close company, arrived there instead with deep scowls upon their faces.

PARTY-POOPERS AND KILLJOYS -- THAT'S WHO THESE MEN WERE!!!

If my wife Lisa had been there, she probably would have broken into singing a little song she would sometimes sing when we were having a family get together and one of our children would arrive then in a rather sullen and despondent mood. Lisa would sing: **"Every party has a pooper, that's why we invited you! Party-pooper, party pooper!"**

And most always the sullen mood of that despondent child would be changed, but I am not so sure this tactic would have had the same effect upon the scribes and the Pharisees' uninvited presence!

Why because these men had truly arrived there on a fault-finding mission!

Unlike all the people who were there who saw Jesus as their HELPER AND FRIEND, these men did not access Jesus in that way at all! They were there, hopefully, to dig up some dirt about Jesus that they could then publish in the NATIONAL ENQUIRER, but try as they may they couldn't really find any, but suddenly saw a door opened to them when they witnessed Jesus and his disciples eating with what they deemed to be "unclean" hands; not unclean physically speaking, but spiritually speaking!

Friends, it was about 500 years before Jesus was born that the religious authorities in Jerusalem had compiled a list of 613 ways that people, who were really devoted to the cause, could hopefully learn to live in perfect obedience to the Ten Commandments.

Yes, God had given the children of Israel those Ten Commandments at the beginning of their Exodus experience through Moses on Mount Sinai. But these 10 commandments were actually very broad in their implications.

Therefore, the religious scholars carefully studied the first five books of the Old Testament known as the Pentateuch, written down by Moses and eventually they came up with 613 different ways a person could do his best to live in perfect obedience to God's law.

This paved the way for God's Old Testament people to falsely believe that it was somehow possible for them to keep the commands of God perfectly, when nothing could have been further from the truth! They began to believe and to teach others that God's salvation was the result of GOD'S MERCY PLUS A HUMAN BEING'S OBEDIENCE.

You know as I studied these words of our Gospel lesson again recently I found myself confronted with a very important question: "What does it mean for the faithful people of God to be truly faithful to God?"

Is it simply matter of going through the motions, and of repeatedly rehearsing and performing a prescribed set of religious rituals that fostered a false sense of "piety" among God's people?

Well, Jesus answers these questions with a very emphatic: "NO!"

Jesus is reminding us that the human heart, spiritually speaking, is the platform from which all of our human lives transpire.

In Psalm 51, King David prays those well-known words we so often pray ourselves: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me! Cast me not away from your presence and take not your Holy Spirit from me! Restore to me the JOY of your SALVATION AND UPHOLD ME, WITH YOUR FREE SPIRIT!"

One of the religious rituals that many of the Jewish people had come to embrace was that of a **ceremonial handwashing before they ate their meals**, though this was never a law that God asked of all his people. It

originated with a command that God gave to Aaron and the priests back in Exodus 30:20-21, to wash their hands ceremoniously before they entered the TABERNACLE, BUT IS NEVER ANYTHING THAT GOD ASKED OF HIS PEOPLE WAS A WHOLE!

They were to start with their left hand by holding their fingers up into the air. Then they were to pour one-and-one-half eggshells of water from the top of their fingers and it flow down to their wrist, after which they would then make a fist with their right hand and scrub that left hand. Then the same process would be repeated by their left hand on their right hand the second time.

Jesus was asking everyone present there that day a question that our Risen Savior is still asking every one of us here today: **“What is the condition of your heart?”** **And the condition of a person’s heart is extremely important because without a functioning heart, there can be no life within us, neither physically speaking nor spiritually speaking!**

Jesus admonished these Pharisees for their hypocrisy and self-righteousness. He even cited an example of their hypocrisy: 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 ... 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.*”**

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE FAITHFUL PEOPLE OF GOD TO BE TRULY FAITHFUL? It is not simply a matter of going through the motions and performing a few religious rituals, it is having a heart for God and allowing our hearts and minds to become so full with the love that our God has for us in the gift of his Son that we become new creations ourselves in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:17)!

What does it mean for the faithful people of God to become truly faithful to God? I believe that there is no better answer to this question given to us anywhere in the Bible than the answer Jesus shares with us in his well-known parable about the GOOD SAMARITAN (Luke 10:25-37)!

You might remember how another religious authority stood up one day to test Jesus, asking our Lord: “Teacher what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

Because he was a rather self-righteous fellow Jesus asked him: **“What is written in the Law? How do you read it?”** And he answered, ***“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself!”***

Jesus then further said to the man, ***“You have answered correctly; do this and you will live!”***

BUT HERE IS WHERE THE REAL BUGABOO COMES IN! Because we are born with a sinful nature, St. Paul tells us, in quoting Psalm 107:7: *“There is none righteous, no not one! No one understands! No one seeks for God! All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one” (Romans 3:10-12)!*

Therefore, Jesus responds by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan, about a man who was one day traveling down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, when unfortunately, he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed; leaving him there on the roadside half-dead; perhaps in a coma and unconscious!

BUT PRAISE BE TO GOD! WOULDN'T YOU KNOW IT! THIS SHOULD HAVE BEEN THAT VICTIM'S LUCKY DAY BECAUSE ALL OF A SUDDEN A PRIEST COMES WALKING DOWN THE ROAD, but when the priest saw this poor soul of a man lying there--he felt no compassion in his heart towards this man at all! Instead, he conveniently passed by him on the other side of the road!

But then secondly, another highly-respected synagogue leader, a Levite, comes walking down that same road! Surely this man will take compassion on a fellow Jew! But he also failed to minister to this poor fellow!

BUT THEN THE LAST PERSON IN THE WORLD YOU WOULD HAVE EVER EXPECTED TO SHOW THAT POOR VICTIM SOME MERCY CAME TRAVELING DOWN THE ROAD: A “SAMARITAN!” AND EVERYONE KNEW THAT ORTHODOX JEWISH PEOPLE HAD NOTHING IN THEIR HEARTS BUT CONTEMPT AND DISDAIN TOWARDS SAMARITANS! SAMARITANS WERE SO DESPISED BY JEWS THAT THE SAMARITANS HAD TO BUILD THEIR OWN TEMPLE UPON MOUNT GERIZIM.

But this Samaritan, of all people, who truly had a heart for God that was spiritually alive and pulsating vibrantly with his love for God--that his heart that became the platform from which his whole life transpired. Without hesitation, he stopped to help this Jewish fellow. He had compassion on him. He bound up his wounds as best he could; pouring on them some oil and wine. Then he set him up on his donkey and took him to a nearby Hampton Inn; leaving his credit card on file at the front desk to provide for this poor victim's further needs!

Which one of the three proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers!

Da! It was obvious wasn't it! Actions speak louder than words, don't they? When Jesus asked that lawyer pointblank: “Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” he said, “The one who showed him mercy!” And Jesus said to him, **“YOU GO, AND DO LIKEWISE!”**

Nevertheless, the scribes and the Pharisees asked out Lord, *“Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”* And Jesus gave these party-poopers the last answer they would ever have expected to hear coming from Jesus' own mouth coming towards them that day: *“Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written in ISAIAH 29:13, ‘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!’”*

Let's remember that Jesus was and is much more than a mere ordinary man. In the Gospel of John 2:24, we are told that Jesus always knew what was in the hearts of other people; he did not need any human being to tell him what was in the hearts and minds of another person because he could look there and see!

Therefore, Jesus' rebuke of these scribes and Pharisees shows us that God our Heavenly Father is after our hearts and not just our lip service! He wants our hearts not behavior modification. God is after worshippers: people who desire to orient their entire lives around him, because they truthfully do find their greatest delight in God and actually want him to fill them with his loving presence!

The Pharisees missed this and thought that what God wanted more than anything else was "clean" hands. They thought that God was mostly interested in their performing all sorts of religious rituals correctly, more than he was interested in anything else!

Does God's law contain guidelines for living? Of course it does, but that is NOT the law's primary function. The law's primary function is to show our sin, to teach us that we are bad people, to grind down that arrogant pride that believes we can actually lead God-pleasing lives in and of ourselves. Its function is to terrify us with the sure and certain knowledge that our efforts have only succeeded in earning God's wrath - His eternal punishment both here in time and forever in eternity. If you read God's law and feel absolutely miserable, good! That means that the law is doing its job.

Why does God give us the law if it makes us so miserable? Is God some sort of sadist who enjoys seeing people suffer? Not at all! Instead, God uses the misery of the law to open up the Gospel for us. The law, by showing us how sinful we are, shows us our need for a Savior. It knocks down our natural resistance to the Good News of Jesus Christ. It totally obliterates any thought on our part that we somehow cooperate with God in order to save ourselves from sin. The law puts us to death in order that we might be brought to life by the Gospel. The Gospel that brings us to life is this: ***"That Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to many people after His resurrection. Those who believe that Christ's suffering and death on the cross forgives them of their sins and that His resurrection from the dead opened up the way to eternal life for them - these people have this new life!"***

The only way to receive the free gift of God's perfect salvation is for us to receive the Holy Spirit's gift of faith. The only way that the law can help us is when the Holy Spirit uses it to show our total inability to save ourselves. It is then that the Holy Spirit can use the Gospel to show us that our salvation is in no one other than the Son of God! It is Jesus Christ alone, who can give us and does give us, eternal life. Amen