

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23 Pastor Bill Uetricht 13 Pentecost 8/30/09

This week I want to begin my sermon on a bit of a participatory note. If you were driving down the street and you are probably at least forty and you see a VW bus with peace signs and flower-power bumper stickers pasted all over it, you would say that inside this bus is more than likely a . . . Hippie. And similarly, if you were driving down the street and you saw a BMW that contained a man who was wearing (and how you can see this from your vantage point I don't know) a Rolex watch, a shirt with an alligator insignia on it and Gucci shoes, you would say that inside this car is a . . . yuppie.

You are able to fill in the blanks because of what James Dunn describes as "identity markers." There are markers in life that in many ways help us and others to provide a label for us, help us distinguish ourselves from others. And generally, these markers are good things. They give direction to people. They help people function in a group. They help people know who they are. And they help *others* know who they are. These markers help establish identity. If you see a horse-drawn buggy in the middle of rural Indiana or Michigan you know that you are probably witnessing an Amish person or family. If you are with someone who takes out time five times a day to pray it may be possible that you are with a Muslim. If you spend Sunday with someone who will not cook, swim, or shop it might be likely that you are with a conservative Christian Reformed person. Identity markers have existed and will continue to exist among all people and every culture. And often those markers do truly bring good things to life in community.

Yet it is identity markers that Jesus is taking on today in our gospel lesson. There is a controversy brewing between Jesus and his disciples and the Pharisees and the Scribes. The controversy centers on the

identity marker of hand washing and, it appears, dish washing. The Pharisees complain that Jesus' disciples aren't participating in the identity marker that Mark says all Jews do, and that is, ceremonial washing before eating. There is some evidence that Mark may be overstating the case here. Evidently, the Pharisees of Jesus' time may not have been as fussy about ceremonial washing as Mark portrays them. There were groups, however, that existed at the time Mark wrote his gospel who may have been a bit persnickety about this practice. Mark may be addressing the controversy that existed in his own community. Or maybe he is simply using what many of resort to in arguments to get across our point—exaggeration. I sense more than a little sarcasm in Mark's words today. And I would like to read him with that sarcasm highlighted: "For the Pharisees, *and all Jews*, do not eat unless they **thoroughly** wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat **anything** from the market unless they wash it; and there are also **many other** traditions that they observe, *the washing of cups, pots, bronze kettles,*" and some manuscripts read, "*beds.*" Mark obviously thinks that this particular identity marker has gone astray.

How did it all go wrong? Is the problem the identity marker? I don't think so. The ceremonial laws of the Jews really were rooted in a sense of trying to add a religious element to everything that was done. The desire was to make the common sacred. It's the kind of thing that we do by having a prayer before dinner. It's an ordinary meal, but we set it aside with expressions of gratefulness to God. Would you think that prayer before meals is a bad idea? Probably not! So we should be a little tolerant of the Pharisees. They seem to know that all of life belongs to God, the ordinary and the extraordinary. The ceremonial

rite of washing hands and washing dishes was a way to communicate that. It also was a way to establish identity. We are a certain kind of Jew, and this is what we do, and ultimately, who we are. But still, something went wrong, very wrong.

In Mark's view we start to see the wrongness in the question that the Pharisees and scribes ask Jesus: "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" The tradition of the elders. This is a reference to the so-called oral law, the law that was added on to the original law by the elders, the great teachers of the faith. The disciples are said not to follow the oral law, the increasingly complex commentary on what some folks may refer to as the basics. It is then that Jesus labels the Pharisees "hypocrites," as people who honor God with their lips and not their hearts. "In vain," he says, quoting God from the book of Isaiah, "do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines." "You," Jesus says to the Pharisees, "abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

What has gone wrong is that the identity markers have become too important, the identity markers have replaced the big thing, the identity markers have trumped the commandment of God. Jesus in the gospel of Mark tells us what the command of God is: to love God and neighbor. That is the big thing. And sometimes identity markers get in the way of the big thing. I don't sense that Jesus is opposed to the law, something that some Lutherans conclude as we proudly proclaim our heritage of grace. Let's face it. He has come out of the tradition that sees the law as a sign, as our reading from Deuteronomy indicates, of the nearness of God, a sign that God loves. I am not even fully certain that we can conclude from Mark that Jesus is opposed to the oral law.

But this is certain: he is a reformer who wants the big thing to be the big thing, and the less important things to live in proper relationship to the big thing.

And sadly, what so often goes wrong is that the less important things become too important. Too often identity markers become boundary markers. They become a way of reinforcing a false sense of superiority that is fed by the intent to exclude others. The big thing is to love God and to love neighbor, and sometimes our identity markers become a way for us not to love, but rather to exclude. To wash yourself and your pots before dinner became for some a way to make it clear that they are not profaned, polluted by the Gentiles. It was not simply a matter of who you were but who you were not. We are not they.

Jesus says that what truly matters, what is the big stuff, is not the external markers but rather what comes from within. It is what comes from within that makes us clean or unclean, Jesus says. The truly bad stuff is that which comes from hearts that are not oriented toward the love of the neighbor, hearts that exclude others, hearts that hurt and destroy others. It is new hearts that Jesus wants.

You see, the center of our faith is the loving heart of God, a heart that, as the cross of Christ reveals so fully, embraces broken, uncentered people. The center of our faith is the One described by James as the Father of lights who never changes, who constantly is giving every perfect gift. The center of our faith is the One who, as Deuteronomy says, loves so dearly that he draws near to his people with his heart through the gift of the law.

What truly matters then are not the external identity markers that can serve to separate, but rather hearts that are oriented toward God

and toward neighbor. John Ortberg says, therefore, that the identity markers for Christians will be “circumcised heart[s] and a diet of justice and love.” “They who do justice will live in the presence of God. They who do justice will live in the presence of God.” To do justice, to love, to welcome, to include—this is what it means to be clean before God. What will set us aside will not necessarily be external practices, but love. Who God is is love. What will mark us will be love.