

Glen Ridge Congregational Church,
August 30, 2009, Proper 17, Pentecost 13
James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 13-15, 21-23
Rev. Cynthia Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

There have been times when people have asked how we decide on the readings for a particular week which leads us to sermon preparation. Most of you probably know about the lectionary – it's a 3 year cycle of readings which takes us through much of the Bible. It's interesting what passages are left out of the lectionary – but that's another story for another day. Churches aren't required to follow the lectionary but many do and it's not all that long ago when most mainline churches adopted the same lectionary we use –even in the Roman Catholic tradition. So no matter where you worship on a given Sunday, it's likely that you'll hear a sermon based on the same text we use here.

So it's early in the week when I take a look at the passages – usually one from the Hebrew Bible, a psalm, a gospel reading, and an epistle – after I've read them, I let them percolate as I go through the daily activity of the church – from visitations, to phone conversations, to preparation for ministry meetings, and most of all at this time of year, to the planning for the next school year activity. There's not much doubt that the pace is about to pick up again in earnest.

As the week goes on, something always pops out of the text that has a relationship with our life together and my part in it. Believe me, this Book is as vital today as it ever has been and I think that's a lesson for all of us in and of itself – if we read and take seriously the text and let it work on us and let ourselves work on it, it comes alive and gives me guidance where we never expected to find it.

This week – there were 3 things that especially touched me – living with tradition – here shown by the traditions of the Pharisees and what defiles us – then there's the power of the tongue – and lastly, the very placement of this passage in the gospel of Mark.

Mark is the oldest of the 4 gospels – probably written in the 60's, a collection of stories, traditions written down as the early church began to take shape. In this passage we have another encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees – those constant critics so threatened by Jesus and his growing group of followers that they were looking for reasons to discredit him. Remember too, these people are Jews – they're not known as Christians yet, and the law remained of utmost importance to them. If you wander through the Old Testament book of Leviticus, you'll find the rules for daily living. Well, the Pharisees saw all these rules as part of their worship and it was Jesus' breaking of these laws that kept getting him into trouble.

So here are the scribes and Pharisees watching Jesus and his disciples eat, but they don't follow the ritual washing of hands, food, and dishes. Can't you just see this group off to the side watching, pointing, talking among themselves and finally not able to contain themselves any longer. So they question Jesus – you're breaking tradition – you're – we're not supposed to do it this way.

Doesn't this sound a little familiar? Jesus questions the traditions – he doesn't back off from challenging them one bit – he puts a whole new perspective on what's truly important. And isn't that something we ought to be doing periodically – I know as we've lived through and are living through this downturn these days, many families are experiencing their lives together in new ways – the simple life has become much more appealing with dramatic benefits. Our perspective has been challenged and often changed in good ways.

Back to Jesus sitting there with the Pharisees: whose rules are these anyway? Those of God? Or those imposed by humans? I'm sure we can all think of present day situations that apply in some of our neighboring church traditions. You may have heard me talk about a life changing event for me that happened during my clinical training at a large Roman Catholic diocesan hospital outside of Boston. We were all invited to preach a homily at the daily mass held in the chapel for staff and patients – I was enthusiastic about it, thinking I could do my part for ecumenical relations. That is, until the priest in charge said matter of factly, of course you can't take communion – you can preach but you can't share the sacrament. Well....I was surprised at how upset I was by this – and my Roman Catholic colleagues in the program really had no idea why I was so upset. We had some amazing conversations – what's your authority for this? If it's the Bible, where does it say that only Roman Catholics can take communion? And further, when you say in your liturgy – using the same words that we use every week – when you declare all are welcome – don't you mean it? It was an interesting discussion to say the least – and a very painful one for me – and I decided not to preach a homily after all. I was either welcome or not – it seems to me that God's grace is full and complete, not depending on my religious tradition. There's a lesson in that too, isn't there.

Please know that I don't mean to compare the Roman Catholic hierarchy with the Pharisees – not at all – but I did come away from this experience with a new appreciation for the Sacrament of Communion and the open table we have in our tradition and how very important it is to me. And I do continue to ask the question, “who says” when tradition bumps into our life together as church. And I make an effort to teach the confirmands to ask the same question – it's good for all of us to take a minute and ask, “who says” on occasion.

Soon our Ministry meetings will begin again after a quiet summer – quiet for all but the members of the Ministry of Stewardship and MOM – but as we begin to plan activities, gather for worship, how like the Pharisees are we? Are we slaves to tradition? Someone once told me that the hardest traditions to break are those but 2 or 3 years old. Maybe so. And I'm certainly not advocating we abandon any rich, meaningful traditions here in our life together. Ritual, tradition, bring comfort, teach the story, provide a glue for our common life. But when the tradition itself becomes foremost, when the way we prepare to eat as in this story from Mark this morning becomes more important than the act of nourishment itself, something is lost. We become locked into old ways, ways that may have lost their meaning, ways whose meaning may have been forgotten or outdated. The tradition becomes the object of worship – not using the tradition as a vehicle toward worship.

I've heard too many people say – and I confess I've said it myself sometimes – when a new idea is raised – but we've never done it that way before – or we've always

done it that way before – or perhaps worst of all – oh no – we can't do that. We couldn't. We tried it that way many years ago and it didn't work.

So many times we don't consider something new – our minds are made up even before the discussion ever hits the table. I challenge each and every one of us, when those thoughts come into our minds, and before they come out of our mouths, we ask the question, why? Why not? Who says? Let's uphold tradition by making it a conscious decision rather than just letting it happen. We've all seen how this works in our places of employment, in our families, and yes, even at church. I'm a great believer in tradition – but not when it becomes oppressive, stifling, when it blocks our reason for being – let us be as Jesus here: he didn't waffle with the Pharisees. He spoke directly to them, no double talk, no evasion. Jesus was about something entirely new happening.

I think we in church sometimes have some added trouble with this in that it's often our church which has provided so much stability in our lives. An institution that has long been part of our lives, a place which has brought great comfort – all of us resist change – that's part of being human. And when our church changes with new people, new ideas, new issues surface and we feel threatened, that our safety, our stability might change. I hear people say with great sadness sometimes, "It's just not the same any more."

But that's not the promise, is it. It's only God who never changes. It's God's love that's everlasting, unshakeable. It's God who meets us where we are, and if we allow it, brings us into relationship. The body of Christ changes – not the love of Christ.

It hurts me deeply when I've heard people say of the church, I don't fit in – I certainly experienced that back at that church in Boston – it's the church that's called to be the safe, but at the same time, challenging place, to bring us into relationship with God and each other. And there's the tension between change and tradition. How are we at meeting people where they are, seeing them as brothers and sisters in Christ? All loved by God. All created by God in God's own image.

The second theme of this passage deals with what it is that defiles us. What it is that makes us unclean. What it is that separates us from God and each other.

Jesus tells the Pharisees, tells us, that it not what is outside a person going in which can defile – but the things that come out. It is from within that evil comes – Jesus lists the poisons, the sins: wickedness, deceit, envy, avarice, slander, pride, folly. And expression of those evils in words is just as damaging as any physical action we can take.

We all know the power of the spoken word – the long lasting effect of the spoken word. We remember words that have uplifted us – Kennedy's inaugural address, the I Have a Dream speech, Lincoln's Gettysburg address, certain Bible passages – you can think about those words that have become part of your very being.

When I was a little girl my parents would say to me, "Sticks and stones will break your bones but words can never hurt you." I think that was meant to protect me when it was my turn to be picked on by other kids – at the time I guess it helped – but I'm not so sure it's true. Because we also know that words have the power to leave devastating wounds we can't see, but leave scars as deep and as damaging, as any physical cause indeed. And much harder to heal.

Relationships fractured. Shattered by words. I've been there – I've seen it – he said, she said, you said. The pain left by words is from terrible, hurtful wounds no antibiotic can heal. Words once said, can never be taken back. Words once said, that

have the potential for ruining a life. And I truly believe this is not only true for the ones at whom the words are directed, but for those who say them as well.

Now, I don't think Jesus is telling us to "talk nice" all the time – we've explored that using Paul's letter to the Ephesians as the text this month. We hear the expression, speak the truth in love these days – and that's so hard.

So, how do we turn this around? We don't often actually yell or scream. But how do we live, in our actions, our words, our thoughts according to Jesus' instructions to his disciples, to the crowds around him, to us – it's not easy. I know my thoughts and words can wander where I'd rather they not go.

But we have help. And that leads me to the third point: this story in Mark is placed right between 2 healing stories, 2 places where Jesus works miracles, where people become whole. Between the story of the feeding of the 5,000, the healing of the sick where people were healed just by touching the fringe of Jesus' coat. And after this story comes the healing of the woman's child. The woman came to Jesus begging for her child's healing of demons. And as a result of her faith, the child was healed. There are stories like this throughout the gospel. What does this say to us?

Sandwiched between these wonderful stories of healing, of restoration to wholeness, come these so very difficult teachings from Jesus. I suspect people then had as much trouble as we do with these teachings – of following Christ's word, of doing as he did.

But there's the promise – there is healing all around us. It's our faith that makes it possible – it's our reaching out to touch even the fringe of his coat that makes healing, growth, possible. We get the instructions, but we also get the means to follow the instructions. Let's hold on to that.

God will strengthen us if we are open to it – most of us have felt separated from God's love at one time or another. But we are not. Never. We don't have to walk this journey alone. Where is it that you go to feel especially connected to God? Perhaps in the beauty of creation, through music or the visual arts – what kind of place reminds you that God cares for you in a special and unique way?

And we also need to experience God in community. The power of the liturgy, the prayers, the music – the word shared by God's people can bring some of to that sacred place. We express our identity and affirm one another's identity as brothers and sisters in Christ when we are together in worship.

God is indeed with us. God challenges us every moment of our lives to live as Christ has taught us to live. But God also provides the courage, the nourishment, the sustenance to do just that. Let us continue our journey together. Amen.

Let us pray: turn our eyes to the hills and accept your help, O God. Make us free to take that first step, free to try another way, free to know and accept your everlasting love for us. Help us to know that turning our lives over to you will bring a freedom that we cannot imagine, that serving you brings a joy that passes all understanding, and a peace that may not be broken by the powers and principalities of this world. Show us your way, O God. Give us the courage to follow that path. All this we ask in the name of your son, our teacher, Jesus Christ. Amen.