

The Godly Life (Psalm 45:6; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23)

You may remember several years ago when the Duchess of York, Sarah Ferguson, visited Houston, Texas. It was November, but it was still quite warm. So she wore a summer dress with matching white shoes. And, oh my, what an uproar this caused! All the tv and radio shows were abuzz! It was scandalous! All good Americans knew that it simply wasn't acceptable to wear white shoes after Labor Day!

The way Americans looked at Fergie for wearing white shoes after Labor Day was the same way that the scribes and Pharisees looked at Jesus' disciples for eating without washing their hands. It was scandalous! All good Jews knew that the "tradition of the elders" had to be followed!

The "tradition of the elders" was the acceptable behavior that had developed in Judaism over the centuries. The Jews believed that they were God's chosen people, and they wanted to stay his chosen people. So they developed hundreds of rules to follow to keep themselves pure or clean enough to be in relationship with the holy God. Whether this hand washing was superstition, hygiene, or just symbolism, it was a major characteristic of a good Jew. So the scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders but eat with defiled hands?"

Now, if the scribes and Pharisees were surprised at the behavior of Jesus' disciples, they were even more surprised at Jesus' response! For Jesus didn't try to make excuses for his disciples. He didn't try to justify their behavior. Instead, Jesus boldly told the scribes and Pharisees that they were hypocrites. He told them that they were more interested in following man-made traditions than the commandments of God. And he used the words of the Prophet Isaiah to tell them what God thought of them: "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines."

The scribes and Pharisees were not horrible people. Actually, they were trying very hard to be good people and to lead godly lives. The question they asked Jesus was a reasonable one. The truth is that they weren't so

very different from us. And surely that's why the gospel writer thought it important to share this story with us.

Indeed, even though we don't follow the elaborate hand washing of the scribes and Pharisees, in our effort to lead godly lives, sometimes we too get "off track." So today's gospel lesson has a lot to say to us to help us stay on the right path, the path God would have us follow, in our lives.

First, today's story tells us to be cautious about traditions. We need to remember the story of that new husband who watched curiously as his bride prepared to place a ham in the oven. Before putting it in to cook, she took a knife and carefully cut off both ends of the ham. The husband asked, "Why did you do that? I'm not an expert at cooking hams, but I don't think I ever saw anyone cut off both ends of the ham before cooking it." The wife answered, "You know, I don't really know why I'm doing it. I never cooked a ham before, but that's the way my mother always did it." Her curiosity aroused, she telephoned her mother and asked her why she always cut off both ends of a ham before she cooked it. "Now that you mention it, I don't know, dear," her mother replied. "That's just the way your grandmother always did it. Other than that, I honestly don't have a clue." Determined now to unravel this mystery, the young bride then telephoned her grandmother and asked her why she always cut off both ends of the ham before she cooked it. "Well, sweetheart," her grandmother said, "the first oven we owned wasn't big enough to put a whole ham in, so I had to cut the ends off to make it fit. After that, I guess it just became a habit!" You see? A tradition can become a habit--and even a senseless obsession.

Similarly, some churches take things that have become habits--the color of the carpet; an old hymnal; the order of service--and make them "sacred cows." And how often the people of God have let such things divide them! We must be careful that we don't let our Christian traditions keep us from living as Christians.

I like the story about Queen Victoria when she was at a diplomatic reception in London and the guest of honor was an African chieftain. All went well during the meal, until, at the end, finger bowls were distributed. The guest of honor had never seen a British finger bowl, and no one had thought to brief him before hand about its purpose. So he

took the finger bowl in his two hands, lifted it to his mouth, and drank its contents--down to the very last drop! For an instant there was breathless silence among the British upper crust, and then they began to whisper to one another. But all that stopped when the queen quietly picked up her and drank its contents! A moment later, 500 surprised British ladies and gentlemen simultaneously drank the contents of their own fingerbowls. It was "against the rules" to drink from a fingerbowl, but on that particular evening Victoria changed the rules---because she knew that something was more important than the rules.

Second, today's story reminds us that we are always to choose following God's commandments over following tradition. Jesus told the scribes and Pharisees, "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." Nothing is to keep us from following the two commandments Jesus lifted up for us. Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40).

Third, today's story cautions us to not live our lives finding fault. Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer expressed it well, if not so elegantly, when he said that we humans have a tendency to "sniff for the manure under the roses." The scribes and Pharisees were focused on the failure of Jesus' disciples to wash their hands before they ate. Unbelievable, isn't it? The Kingdom of God was breaking over them like a huge wave--the sick were being healed, the hungry fed, the poor heard good news---all things that Isaiah had said would herald the coming of the Messiah. But all the scribes and Pharisees wanted to talk about was the hand washing tradition! They were so focused on what Jesus' disciples were doing wrong that they missed the holiness of God right in front of them in the person of Jesus. And when we live our lives seeking out and focusing on the faults of others, we not only miss the miracles, workings, and extravagance of God right in front of us. We also miss the mark God has set for us in living. We concentrate on petty codes of behavior and ignore the more important issues which trouble humanity. We spend our time pointing our fingers at those who don't conform to our codes when instead, we should be trying to relieve the oppression, exploitation, degradation, hunger, and suffering of those around us. We find fault

instead of living the way God would have us live--lovingly--by showing compassion; offering forgiveness; working for peace; fighting for justice; giving hope.

Fourth, today's story cautions us about focusing on the outside. Actually, throughout the Bible, we find God warning us about this. Remember the Older Testament story of when the Prophet Samuel was looking for the person to make the new king? According to the story, "the LORD said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature...for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart'" (I Samuel 16:7). And remember in the New Testament how Jesus said, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth" (Matthew 23:27). The Pharisees worried about dirty hands, getting the externals right, but Jesus stressed that we are to get the internals, our hearts, right.

Clarence Jordan, the writer of the Cotton Patch Version of the New Testament and the founder of Koinonia Farm, grew up in a small Georgia town within one hundred yards of the Talbot County Jail. One hot summer night during a revival meeting, while everyone was singing "Love Lifted Me," Jordan noticed the warden of the jail's chain gang. The man was very emotional. He seemed to be deeply moved by the revival. But later that same night, Jordan was awakened by horrible cries coming from the chain gang camp. And he knew what was happening, since he'd heard the screams before. Someone had been placed into the "stretcher" and was being tortured. He also knew only one person could be responsible for inflicting such torture, and this was the same man who had been singing "Love Lifted Me" with such rapture earlier that same evening.

There's a definite difference between just going through the motions of Christianity and really being a Christian. As Frederick Buechner once cleverly pointed out, those who are Christians only on the outside are like the child playing the piano who "holds her hands just as she's been told...she has memorized the piece perfectly. She has hit all the proper notes with deadly accuracy. But her heart's not in it, only her fingers. What she's

playing is a sort of music, but nothing that will start voices singing or feet tapping."

Back in the 70s, British rock star Cliff Richard visited the Sudan and Bangladesh as part of a combination mission/publicity trip for Tear Fund. While he looked good on the outside, his heart wasn't in it. As Cliff Richard said in his book Which One's Cliff?, "the first morning, I must have washed my hands a dozen times. Whenever we stopped, I made a beeline for the communal tap or the well; I didn't want to touch anything, least of all the people. Everyone in those camps, even the babies, was covered in sores and scabs. I was bending down to one little mite, mainly for the photographer's benefit, and trying hard not to have too close a contact, when someone accidentally stood on the child's fingers. He screamed out, and as a reflex, I grabbed hold of him, forgetting all about his dirt and his sores. I remember now that warm little body clinging to me, and the crying instantly stopped. In that moment, I knew I had an enormous amount to learn about practical Christian loving, but at least I'd started."

How often throughout history we've gotten it wrong. The Jews thought a godly life looked like ritual hand washing. Simeon Stylites thought a godly life looked like asceticism, and thus he sat on top of a pillar for 37 years. The Crusaders thought that a godly life looked like killing infidels. The Puritans thought that a godly life looked like somber black and white. Many Christian fundamentalists today think a godly life looks like close-mindedness and condemnation of those who don't interpret the scriptures the way they do. But in our gospel lesson for today, Jesus tells us that a godly life looks like sheer love--love for God and for others--love that springs from a person's heart.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; August 30, 2009