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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
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Lectionary Year B: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Jesus' words about *what goes in* versus *what comes out* are especially intriguing in an age in which people are bred to be consumers. Think about it – we're bombarded from the get-go with messages telling us that if we take this or use that, we'll be better and happier people. I suppose that at least *some* of our habits of consumption are harmless; for example, the vitamin pills and anti-perspirants that we buy merely make us healthier and smell better, and there are surely *worse* things we could be consuming!

But Jesus says that you *can't* defile yourself by what you consume. This could be seen as license to do all sorts of dangerous things, right? Imagine someone using heroin and quoting Jesus in Mark, chapter 7. Surely, there *must* be things that we can consume that cause us to do the sorts of evil deeds Jesus describes – fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly.

Well, maybe.

There's a difference between *what one consumes* and one's *character*. This can explain, for example, how even the most down-and-out drug addict can be a fundamentally moral person...perhaps not always capable of the best judgment, but never causing much harm to other people.

Thus, if you were to ask *is what Jesus says really true*, the answer would be “Yes!” It’s not about what goes in, it’s about what comes out. You could even extend this to a popular old phrase by saying “You *aren’t* what you eat.” In just a few simple words, Jesus debunks everything we’ve ever been conditioned to think about human behavior. “Garbage in, garbage out” is simply not true because, according to Jesus, the garbage is already there. It’s in your heart, and there’s nothing you can do to make yourself any better...or any worse. Instead, you receive the transforming grace of God in Jesus Christ and the things that tainted your character no longer have a definitive stronghold on you.

This isn’t easy for the average person to understand, though. It would be easier to have rules to follow than to be transformed by God’s grace. Rules are clear, while God’s grace is abstract by comparison. Thus, many of us would sooner be told “Do this, this, and this” instead of “Go and be transformed by the grace of God.” Recall that Jesus’ own conclusion regarding what goes in and what comes out was precipitated by some people who were really hung up on the rules. Why? Because it’s easy to identify people who *don’t* follow the rules and make them subjects of ridicule and discrimination.

Moreover, mere following of rules does not equal genuine faithfulness. Jesus recalls the words of Isaiah on this matter: “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.” Going through the motions and following the rules are the hallmarks of religion without faith and of obedience without sincerity. Jesus is looking for *authenticity* instead of punctilious

attention to procedure. So dirty hands at the dinner table (gross as that may sound) is not the catastrophe that the Pharisees say it is...

Now, many of us could walk away from today's Gospel text with the impression that we don't have to wash our hands or worry about what we put in our mouths. Quite honestly, *I* have a problem with the amount of latitude we're given here. While I don't necessarily *disagree* with Jesus, I think there's still plenty of room for misunderstanding. My main concern is that we don't regard Jesus' words as permission to do risky or unsafe things. As you know, I put on my public health hat on frequently, and we all realize that one of the simplest and most effective public health strategies is proper hand washing. And I believe in efforts to promote hand washing not because I believe in punctilious obedience to rules, but because it promotes the population's health and well-being.

One belongs to the realm of the Pharisees and the other belongs to the realm of God's grace.

Grace is how we grow in faith so that we're *not* obsessed with rules but instead filled with life and health and purity of heart. *We know* the difference between people shaped by rules and people shaped by grace. People shaped by rules are rigid, ornery, and unforgiving, while people shaped by grace are understanding, compassionate, and forgiving. Rules reflect a concern for what goes in, while grace reflects a divine beauty that emanates from persons so transformed by it.

Many years ago as a student in Germany, I lived in a dormitory complex that had free bed linen service...*provided* you exchanged dirty bed linens for clean ones before nine o'clock on Friday mornings. One time, though, I arrived at the laundry at approximately two minutes *after* nine. Guess what – the laundry staff wouldn't give me clean bed linens, even though they had plenty on hand. I was two minutes late, which apparently meant *no linens for me*. I was so angry about the stupidity of the situation that I threw my dirty bed linens on the floor and left!

My solution? I bought my own bed linens at a Munich department store and laundered them myself.

The laundry incident remains a constant reminder of orneriness and unnecessary rigidity...

But then there are so many more occasions I can think of where others have shown me their understanding, compassion, and forgiveness. They have come to realize that being a good person means *so* much more than *following the rules*. Remember, just following the rules doesn't make you a good person; as Jesus says, what comes *out of you* matters more than anything.

And that calls to mind all the second chances and reappraisals I've been given by certain individuals who showed up at the right time. When I was in my early thirties, I thought I might not want to be in the ministry anymore; I was working second shift at a window factory in Grafton, North Dakota, but – *at the right time* – my bishop visited me in Grafton, and he helped me figure out a way to do long-term supply work *and* continue

working my “day job.” This was back in my Lutheran days, when, according to the policies of the ELCA, one could be removed from the ministry for not having a proper call to a congregation. My status as a pastor in the ELCA was maintained through this period of time thanks to a request that my bishop made to the synod council to issue a call for interim ministry.

Now, he *could've* been super-rigid and said, “If you’re gonna work at the window factory, you can kiss the church goodbye.” But no, *grace* mattered more than *rules* in my case, so he apparently thought, and I received a second chance.

What you do out of the goodness and genuineness of your own heart is infinitely more important than your attention to the rules. The rules can’t make you good. Only God can make you good. When God gets you in his grasp and transforms you with his grace, you will not defile yourself with what comes out of you, and what you consume will have no effect on you because you will be moderate, considerate, and genuine. Think of examples in your own life of gracious, faithful people and of how they’ve treated you...and pray that you might do likewise.

Amen.