St. Brendan's
Mark7:1-8,14-15,21-23
September 1, 2024
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Today marks the beginning of what the Episcopal Church calls the Season of Creation which runs through October 4. Much of today's liturgy is based on the Celebration Guide for Episcopal Parishes having to do with our care for creation. Our Bishop Thomas is one of the 42 diocesan bishops who have given us permission to stray from our appointed liturgy during this season.

If I am honest, you must know that being an Episcopalian, any suggestion that we should change the liturgy brings out the scribe and the Pharisee in me…which is to say when Pastor Elaine takes me aside and asks if I think what she's written in place of the official Episcopal liturgy is okay, I have two reactions…the first is "oh no, that's not the way we do it", and the second which generally quashes the first, thanks to the grace of God, is what beautiful words she has chosen, what a loving, compassionate message she is sharing, how she so effortlessly and creatively makes liturgy so accessible….which is why Robert and I love St. Brendan's.

I grew up with Episcopal roots that go back generations. My great- great grandparents were among the founders of a church in Washington DC that we attended as children. Then, of all things, I met my husband Robert in a little church in Markham Virginia that his great, great grandparents built. And it's taken so many years for me to untie my heart moored to Episcopal traditions to let go and swim out into that endless ocean of love that God is…which is why I have some empathy with the scribes and Pharisees, while at the same time I want to say, dispense with all the words and listen…listen to what amazing grace God offers to us.

For most of history we've been led to believe that the Pharisees and the scribes were at best self-righteous hypocrites. Or holy policemen. They have been accused of believing they were earning their salvation by their obedience to the law. But the truth is, they believed God gave them the law as a gift. They were devoted to finding a way to bring every aspect of life under the canopy of God's law. And the Purity laws that the disciples were accused of breaking by not washing their hands were among those laws that set Jews a part. These laws were fundamental to their Jewish identity, especially given the Roman occupation.

So why does Jesus come down so hard on them, we might ask. Well because Jesus is not interested in the externals of faithfulness. Not the words, not how beautiful the church is, not how many stained-glass windows there are, not how much outreach we do or how beautiful the music might be. What matters to Jesus is what is going on in our heart. Pastor Elizabeth Johnson puts it this way, "No law or tradition can protect us from the darkness that lurks within our own hearts." Because the heart, which in the ancient world is considered the seat of the will, is so vulnerable. That's what Jesus knows and is trying to tell his disciples as well as the Pharisees and scribes.

Jesus comes down so hard on them because he is not interested in patching up the old order but in offering to show them and us a whole new order. One that lives in the self-giving love of God in Christ… not in the laws the Pharisees and the scribes believed they were charged with enforcing. Jesus says, *"This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."*

The good news here is that despite the fact that Jesus can see into the doubt and unbelief in our hearts, he does not turn away. There he is amidst the disciples who are the closest to him as well as the scribes and Pharisees who disagree with him, many of whom still cannot believe he is the Son of God and he doesn't turn them away. He insists that he has no interest in any of us separating ourselves from those that we deem unholy or unclean, non-believers. No, he is just telling us that following him means we have to be like him and get our hands dirty serving others in all the ways we can.

For many years I was involved with the Episcopal youth ministry in Maine. Twice a year we invited children from 12yrs to 17yrs to join us in what were called Happenings, where we camped for 3 days in one church or another and spent time together. We also did a week at Bishopwood. We prayed, we worshiped and we played.

In the beginning I was convinced that I was called to teach the young people about the Episcopal church, liturgy, hymns, why do we say the creed, and of course I explained there were only 2 creeds that we said, why do we have to be baptized and confirmed to partake of the Eucharist, why do we confess our sins, and so on because I was convinced if they learned the whys of the Episcopal tradition they would want to join the Episcopal Church.

After my first Happening Eucharist, the late Jane Hartwell who was head of the program, called to me to come up front, sat me in a chair facing 90 young people and asked them to tell me what they liked and didn't like about the service and the hymns we had sung. I didn't understand…the Episcopal tradition had reasons for how the church functioned!

After an incredibly uncomfortable silence, one brave young man raised his hand and hesitantly asked if it wasn't possible to just tell the story of the last supper instead of reciting the whole Eucharistic Prayer. The group clapped. We went on to talk about all sorts of aspects of the service…yes they wanted to confess their sins, no they didn't want an informal service outside, they liked being in the nave, yes they wanted more of the modern Christian music but they also liked lots of the hymns. Maybe they could work with me to write a creed that made sense to them. Jane was so loving and wise in giving these young people a voice. I'd like to think I might have come around, but I don't know, as steeped in my tradition as I was.

And for all the years we worked together, I got up at every Eucharist and instead of reading the prayer, I told my version of the story of the last supper. To this day, I often find myself telling that story during the official Eucharistic liturgy at least in my head.

When I saw how eager these kids were to participate, and how much they cared, I was surprised but so delighted too. I was blessed to be a priest to and to learn from the most amazing group of young people for several years. But if Jane hadn't made me sit there and listen, I often wondered how many of them we would have lost along the way. And to this day, those who keep in touch who are now in their twenties and thirties are still attending church. That's what Jesus knew and through Jane's wise and loving ways, I also learned what Jesus was trying to teach the disciples.

So what does this gospel have to do with Creation, I would say everything. Reversing Falls Sanctuary in Brooksville has been holding monthly meetings with pastor and author Andi Lloyd, once a professor of Ecology at Middlebury, now a Congregational minister in Castine, to help us all understand how there is not one species on this earth that can exist alone without all of the rest of us…and that includes us humans…we are all in this wondrous web that connects us to each other from the smallest organism all the way up to humankind, we need each other to survive. When one of us is hurting, all of us share in that hurt. And more importantly when one of us helps creation to heal, we all benefit. Listen to how

the Celebration Guide puts it, *"We proclaim a gospel of salvation that includes our earthly home."* Understanding this requires the attention of a pure heart that is not distracted by rules and regulations.

We read today in the James passage, *"But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves."* The church needs our attention, our care. The earth needs our attention, out care also.

May we all feel the wonder of the community of this church and our community on the earth. And for this we need a heart that is open to the word of God and what it is God calls us to be and do as citizens of both these communities. As we say in our opening statement, *"the Earth does not belong to us, rather we belong to the earth."* I believe that the church does not belong to us but rather we belong to the church.

So let us be brave enough to listen for the word of God and be doers of the word of God, wherever it takes us. We may not find ourselves in our comfort zone, but God didn't promise us to be comfortable… God only promised to never leave us, to be with us always. And for that we offer an endless thanksgiving. Amen