

## **What matters?**

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Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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*Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the 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, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, '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. 'You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.'" Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person." - Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23*

A Lutheran pastor named Janet Hunt was filled with sacramental zeal when she was first ordained and began her ministry at a small, rural church. She was disappointed at first to see that the people of St. Paul's came forward for communion in a single line and received the sacrament standing up. "What's wrong with these people?" she may have thought, privately. Pastor Hunt recalls that "when our first Lent together rolled around I thought to suggest another way ... for the season leading up to Holy Week and Easter perhaps we could celebrate the sacrament ... by kneeling at the [communion rail] ....

*"And so on the first Sunday in Lent we knelt for communion ... I'll never forget that morning as the good people of St. Paul Lutheran Church did as their pastor asked. Winifred, the matriarch ... sat on the right hand side near the back. She was a round faced woman whose wrinkles had been etched from years of smiling ...[but] her knees were not what they used to be. After most of the rest of the congregation had come forward, Winifred made her way to the front as well and knelt with all the rest. I remember wincing to watch as she struggled to get up again.*

*"And [that's when] it hit me: this was why the people of St. Paul's ... did not kneel to receive the sacrament. They had chosen to not kneel out of kindness. If Winifred could not kneel, then no one would."*

By Pastor Hunt's own admission, in her conviction about how her people should properly receive the Body of Christ, she had failed to see how they were seeking to be the Body of Christ.

*"The next week," she writes, "we quietly returned to standing as the bread and wine were shared ... [and that was] when I first began to discern what mattered and what didn't [matter] in ministry."<sup>1</sup>*

The distinction between what matters and what doesn't matter seems to be the central theme in today's gospel scene from Mark. A group of learned and devout religious authorities of the day show up with the apparent aim of discrediting the upstart Galilean rabbi, Jesus. Having observed what they believe are the unclean eating habits of Jesus' followers, they try to publically shame Jesus. "What's wrong with your people? They don't even wash their hands before eating, as the tradition clearly commands."

These rituals had been laid down in the law in part to remind the individual and community of God's provision and God's call to purity of life in the context of a most basic feature of daily life, the meal. But the primordial intentions of religious rituals often become obscured by the secondary—the *how* and *where* and *by whom* and with what finery and precision. Over time, the rubrics become elevated to the status of tradition. And so it is that the Pharisees and the scribes asked Jesus, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?"

The tone we can imagine in their complaint reminds me of a journalist who writes under the name Snark Twain and who once defined 'tradition' as "*Nostalgia repurposed as a weapon of argument.*"<sup>2</sup> Such appears to have been the case with these clergy. Notice that Jesus does not discredit religious authority or the law or the cleanliness rituals *per se*. Rather, he responds to his auditors by urging them to sort out what matters and what doesn't matter, the primordial intention of holiness in contrast to the outward rubrics.

Some of this also came into better focus for me when a clergy colleague recently told me about his grandfather's upbringing in a particular Roman Catholic parish. In the event that a Eucharistic host was dropped on the ground during the mass there—whether dropped by priest, lay minister or member of the congregation—the mass was halted, deemed invalid and started over again from the beginning. Whether with or without the sermon I was not told. But the grandfather recalled the terribly sinking feeling as a child in the moment of desecration, as he had been so looking forward to getting to the extended family communion meal already warming in the oven at his grandmother's house.

The high standard in that parish no doubt reflected the highest possible theology of the Sacrament and was meant to show the greatest reverence for Christ. But it failed to take into account that Christ falling on the ground is intrinsic to a complete and true theology of Incarnation and the Sacrament. He came '*to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us.*' (BCP, p. 362) Christ is willingly placed in our hands, soiled as they are with our failures, our self-serving illusions, the discrepancies between what we say we believe, what we aspire to, and what we actually do with these hands.

If today's gospel is any indicator, some of the discrepancies and soiled hands in our lives arise from our impressions and distortions when it comes to matters of class and privilege, our own and others'. Notice in this morning's gospel scene that the Pharisees and scribes who came to investigate Jesus '*had come from Jerusalem.*' Imagine any of us in the context of a work assignment being asked to go and investigate 'that brewing problem down in Joliet.' They probably drew straws to determine who had to go up to rub shoulders with the low life Galileans. Imagine them showing up in the diocesan limousine and looking down with pity on the sorry, uneducated, misguided, dirty regional self-styled rabbi and his followers.

Let's not pretend that we don't also do the same. Wherever you or I are on the socio-economic spectrum, whatever our level of education or our skin color or sexual orientation, we have our Galilees, those places where we can go, literally or imaginatively, and feign pity for 'those poor, dirty people,' those wretches who don't know any better, those who would be purer and more godly if only their politics or morality or education or cleanliness were more like our own.

When it comes to what matters and what doesn't matter, we humans divide our worlds into 'our people' and 'those Galileans.' As William James once observed, "*A great many people think that they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices.*"<sup>3</sup> And if any of this makes us feel agitated and defensive, perhaps we are tuning into what the examiners from Jerusalem were feeling by the end of today's gospel scene.

What matters and what doesn't matter? Where did we get those categories? Can we recall a moment when what had seemed to ultimately matter no longer did so? Does the form of our own religion merely swaddle us in smug reassurance? Or does it continue to provoke us to genuine holiness, forgiveness and justice?

The scene from Mark that depicts the back and forth between the religious leaders and Jesus partly helps us understand the context and values of Jesus and his ministry and his followers and his detractors. But the same scene only becomes the gospel when it also becomes a scalpel that exposes our own hearts and convicts us of what matters and what doesn't matter.

<sup>1</sup> "*What matters and what doesn't ...*," from the preaching blog '*Dancing with the Word,*' the Rev. Dr. Janet H. Hunt, August 25, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Citation lost.

<sup>3</sup> The quote is consistent with the writings of William James, but I've learned that it was printed in a religious publication, *Zion's Herald* in conjunction with a 1906 oration by Methodist Episcopal bishop William Fitzjames Oldham (1854-1937).