

Part 1: Read Mark 7:1-23

“What really matters?” This is the overarching question hanging over this chapter.

The lectionary only gave us two-thirds of the chapter to read today. However, I find the last two stories in the chapter to be deeply important to our understanding of “what really matters.”

So, instead of having us try to chew the texts in one big bite, I’ve decided to break them and deal with them in two parts.

Throughout the gospel, Jesus repeatedly says to his audiences, “Let anyone with ears to hear, listen.” Jesus teaches, and teaches, and teaches, and usually his disciples are the ones who admit that they don’t understand what he’s talking about. So, it is as if Jesus in his frustration says, “Why are your ears stopped up? LET THEM BE OPENED!” Sometimes, instead of referencing deafness, he treats the same frustration as blindness. “Why are your eyes closed? LET THEM BE OPENED!”

It is remarkable how easy it is to miss what is right in front of you. As a benign example, I was making lunch in the midst of writing this sermon. I went into the pantry to pull out the electric panini press to make a grilled cheese sandwich. I carried it into the kitchen, plugged it in; put the cheese slices between the bread, opened up the panini maker.... And then realized I had brought out the waffle-maker by mistake. One is silver, the other is white. My

head was just someplace else...and because of it, I was blind to my cooking device.

I feel like this is the battle that Jesus is constantly facing: people's minds are so concentrated on one thing or another, that they cannot conceive of what he is trying to teach them...even if it is a key that unlocks a portion of God's kingdom!

In the first half of our text, Jesus is confronting not just people whose minds are closed, but in fact a whole *closed system*. It is probably best summed up by Jesus' comments in verse 13:

You do away with God's word in favor of the rules handed down to you (that is, tradition"), which you pass on to others. And you do many things like this.

In today's text, Jesus is speaking out against the ways millenia of Jewish traditions have obfuscated God's commandments. However, reading Jesus' words today, a spotlight shines on the 2000 years of the Christian Church and its myriad denominations. Through the centuries since Jesus, followers of Christ have sought ways to define and defend the purity of the Church. In fact one of the questions we heard our officers answer a few weeks ago was, "Do you promise to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church?" (emphasis added) "Sure," one might answer, "if you can please define for me what that means." How do we define the "purity" Jesus' teachings? I'm not sure Jesus was so interested in that...but the church, along with the religious officials of his time certainly were.

In the first story, people complain about his disciples' disregard for the tradition of ritual washing before meals. If one didn't engage in the correct ritual before eating, that one was clearly not of proper upbringing. It was a way to define who was "clean" or "unclean." A way to judge who really deserved the benefits of religious life.

It reminds me of something that happened to me when I was young. I grew up with the privilege of occasionally going to proper meals with my grandparents. I distinctly remember one meal during which, after the main course was served, people passed around little bowls of water with lemon slices in them. I thought, "How nice, little bowls of lemon-water to cleanse my palate before eating dessert." I thought I had this fancy-shmancy stuff figured out. As I went to raise the bowl to my lips, one of my sisters kicked me under the table and shook her head violently. "You don't *drink* it!" she whispered AT me. "You're supposed to dip your fingers into it." I got the raised eyebrow from my grandfather for that one...and with it, the flush of shame.

This is 100% what's going on in this text: culture-shaming of the disciples.

"How," the religious leaders ask Jesus, "could those following you be so socially uncouth?"

This was just the opening for which Jesus was looking. He unleashes a quotation from the prophet Isaiah (29:13), summarizing it in this way, "You ignore God's commandment while holding on to rules created by humans and handed down to you." And then he offers a "case in point." God's law says "honor your father and mother."

He accuses the Pharisees of circumventing this obligation by allowing people to will their estates to the Temple (declaring them *korban*). Such vows of dedication froze one's assets until at death they were released to the Temple treasury....Because this leaves one's parents financially ostracized, Jesus argues, the "vow" to the Temple becomes a "curse" upon the elderly, and "nullifies the command of God." (7:11-13)

What Jesus points out, is that the shaming of the disciples by the officials is really the result of a corrupted "tradition of the elders." Instead of keeping to the simplicity of the commandments, conventional codes had been created through the centuries to divide out who was in and who was out. In this tete-a-tete with the officials, Jesus is calling to account this closed system, seeking to **open it up** using the measurement of "loving one's neighbor as oneself" over "they way we've always done it!"

Jesus links this teaching with another criticizing the kosher system of eating. Basically Jesus' argument is, "Look all food enters the mouth, works its way through the digestive system, and is eventually expelled from the body. How can anyone judge anyone else by the types of food that they eat?" Therefore, Jesus concludes, "that no food could contaminate a person in God's sight."(19) Thereby opening up one more human-created restriction.

Then he turns the situation around and says that what breaks God's heart isn't about what one takes in, but rather what one puts out into the world.

Remember, Jesus picked up the mantle from John the Baptizer, calling on people to turn their hearts and lives around, away from "human things" (8:33)

into cultivating those things that honor God. So, he ends this conversation about “what really matters” by proclaiming that it is how one lives one’s life in relation to the greatest commands. The list of bad behaviors (sexual sins, thefts, murders, adultery, greed, evil actions, deceit, unrestrained immorality, envy, insults, arrogance, and foolishness) are all borne from broken relationships with God, neighbor, and, it should be pointed out, self. Yes, we dishonor ourselves. Jesus is saying, “control what you can control. Forget the outside forces that try to place shame upon you. Discipline yourselves to focus on what I--not, tradition--coach you to be and do, and you will give glory to God.

There’s a curious thing that happens in the text. In most versions of the bible we go directly from verse 15 to verse 17; verse 16 is skipped. There is a note that reads, *Other ancient authorities add verse 16, “Let anyone with ears to hear listen”*. I’m sure biblical scholars have their reasons for leaving this verse out. However, in the second portion of the sermon, I’ll explain why this verse--occurring in the middle of the chapter--is important to the whole. For now, let’s prepare to hear the rest of the chapter by joining together in a new hymn to us,

Open Your Ears, O Faithful People (GtG#453)

Part 2: Read Mark 7:24-37

“What really matters?” is our question for today. Mark’s narrative in this chapter has Jesus answering this question with the command to focus on following God’s Word, and forsaking traditions that cause one to exhibit behaviors that deviate from doing so. Remember that silly little story I told earlier about pulling out the waffle iron instead of the panini maker? It is so easy to allow ourselves to be distracted, and switch our behaviors to autopilot. Is this first story telling us that it was even possible for Jesus to do the same? Jesus travels north to a region that is rich with many cultures. Mark tells us Jesus went there and didn’t want to be noticed. Is he seeking respite? I know when I’m seeking time for myself, I allow my mind to relax and to switch off the “serious” matters; to let down my guard.

Jesus is in a house and a woman, Mark clearly let’s us know, a *Gentile*, enters the house, and asks Jesus to heal her troubled daughter. For whatever reason, Jesus addresses her in what comes across as hurtful and demeaning. Is he in such need of alone time that he was willing to say this so that she would dismiss herself, and leave him be? Mark doesn’t tell us. But his comments certainly *feel* like they belong in that earlier list of bad behaviors. It feels like Jesus has activated his fully human side, and is acting hypocritically to what he taught in the earlier part of the chapter.

Fortunately, the woman has a quick comeback and begins the process of redeeming the situation. To Jesus’ statement that his “bread of wisdom” shouldn’t be given to “the dogs,” she says, “Yes, Rabbi, but even the dogs under

the table get the family scraps.” Due to her faith...due to her advocacy for her daughter...due to her capacity to not be intimidated...Jesus blesses her and lets her know that her daughter has been made well.

Some people simply cannot see this story in light of Jesus showing prejudice and discrimination against the gentile woman. Some will say he was just testing her and knew that she would show her strength. I think these interpretations weaken the story. For me it is a powerful witness to just how hard it is to overcome the racist, misogynist, jingoistic, homophobic, sectarian behaviors that cause us to separate ourselves from one another. I believe there is strength in considering that this woman *caused* Jesus to **open his eyes** and **unstop his ears** regarding the traditional beliefs that had been programmed deep within himself. Her behavior even changes his understanding of whom he came to serve: was it just the “children” of Israel, or has he been awakened to the true power of God to serve anyone who has faith in his ability to make them whole?

In his final story in this chapter, Mark hits us over the head with a symbolic act that points us back to that missing verse earlier in the chapter. Do you recall what it said? *“Let anyone with ears to hear listen”*

Right after Jesus revokes his pledge to reserve his powers only for the “children,” ***opening himself*** to the gentile woman and her daughter, he travels back to traditionally Jewish territory, and a deaf and mute man is brought to him.

Jesus takes the man aside, apparently uses his saliva as a healing agent, looks up to heaven, exhales deeply, and speaks the hardest word to pronounce in all of scripture, *Eff-a-tha*. This is an Aramaic phrase. While doing a heavenly thing, Jesus invokes the common language of the people. The phrase is a command, and it is translated as “Be opened!” Or, “Open up!” While Mark’s Jesus uses this phrase to unstop the ears and tongue of this person, this command is akin to John’s story of the freeing of Lazarus from the grave...“roll away the stone, and let him come out!”

Jesus’ greatest miracle, it seems, is when he can get anyone--ANYONE--to hear clearly his message of God’s love. And, even while Mark often has Jesus instruct people to tell no one about what he has done for them, the truth is, people are so overcome by the joy of being set free that their tongues are **unstopped**, and their mouths **open up** to proclaim their praise! Indeed, all of us who have been “touched” by Jesus are called to perform the important work of the apostle; to receive his message with clarity, and share it with others so that they may claim the freedom to be found in God.

We are now halfway through the gospel. Now that our ears are opened, and our tongues are freed, it is time to make the turn toward Jerusalem. It is time for us to see the extent to which Jesus would go to free us not only from distracting--yeah, even harmful--traditions, but from death itself. But we still have a long way to go, and a few more temptations to overcome. And so we pray, again, in song: *Open Your Ears, O Faithful People (GtG#453)*