



“What Matters”

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Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

“What matters?” Annaleigh first uttered those words as a preschooler. “What matters, Momma?” Amanda and I tried for a long time to figure out what Annaleigh was trying to convey when she spoke that phrase. “What matters?” Then one day we finally realized what she was saying: she wanted us to know, “It doesn’t matter.” When she felt like she didn’t have to worry about something, she would say, “What matters, Momma?” Who cares, Mom. It doesn’t matter. I know everything is going to be ok. I know what matters and what doesn’t. This phrase has become a common one in our home with our whole family using it often. “What matters, Momma? What matters?” I think the religious leaders in Jesus’ day could’ve used an Annaleigh in their lives. “What matters, Pharisees? What matters?”

Well, we are back in the Gospel of Mark after five weeks in John’s “Bread of Life” chapter. But we have landed in an odd place. We are no longer talking about bread but about the unclean hands that are eating the bread. The text puts us right in the middle of an argument that I’m sure you’ve had in your house. I know I’ve had it in mine, especially at the dinner table. “Girls, did you wash your hands? If not, get up and go get clean.” Handwashing is our daily routine and it is rather easy to do, to take just a few seconds to get clean. But, is this all this passage, this argument, is about? Well, yes and no. Yes, it really is about the practice of washing hands. No, as is often true in such arguments, there is more going on beneath the surface than we can initially see.

With our kids, with my kids, maybe they just forgot to wash their hands because they were tired from playing in the dirt and mud outside. Or maybe they were pushing against all of the rules Mommy and Daddy tried to make. Author and preacher, David Lose, says, “So, maybe not washing their hands, in this case, is less about forgetfulness and more about testing their parents’ authority. The same thing is happening here. It’s not just about washing hands, it’s about the tradition and authority behind that practice. Which is the point the Pharisees press: ‘Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders?’ they ask, somewhat aghast at the implications of Jesus and his disciples running rough shod over tradition. What is at stake, then, is not just a specific practice but the larger question of authority. In short, the Pharisees want to know, just who does Jesus think he is to flout the tradition of the elders?’”

But I get it. The Pharisees needed order. Should we be so hard on them? The Pharisees were trying to give this minority people, the Jews, a sense of identity, a sense of closeness to God. The laws and traditions were for the Jews to lean into their status as a holy people, a people set apart by God for God. These systems and doctrines served as a boundary or “fence” between their neighbors who practiced other religions and other customs. The religious laws were to keep the Jews from being absorbed into foreign cultures. Ned Lenhart, the Pastor of Living Water

Lutheran Church says, “Giving up any of these things was to give up being a Jew. The Pharisees not only followed the 613 laws of the Torah, but they also followed the oral tradition that told one how to carry out those 613 laws: what constituted work on the Sabbath, how far one could walk on the Sabbath, and so forth. These traditions eventually would be written down and form the basis of what became the Talmud; teaching that also contained instructions about rules related to handwashing.”

But what was so important about handwashing that the Pharisees began to criticize the disciples? I mean, I know that we all encourage our children to wash their hands before eating. We think handwashing is about germs and dirt, but not so for the Pharisees. They were more concerned about making every moment holy, every part of life holy. They believed that holiness was not just for temple rituals and practices or simply for the priest. Holiness and closeness to God was for everyone. The priests washed their hands before a sacrifice in the temple and, in the same way, common people washed their hands before meals as a sign of holiness.

But God’s presence wasn’t simply in the act of washing hands. Just as the priests washed their holy vessels, common folks were to wash their cups and pots and other dishes as a sign of holiness as well. This was to show that God was not only in the temple but God was in the home, too. God was in the midst of food and eating and fellowship and hospitality. The Pharisees hoped to make the Torah and the Laws of Moses accessible to all people. All of life was holy. God was close to every single one of God’s people. But, the problem was that the Pharisees began to focus on the rules and rituals and regulations and forgot what the rules were meant to do... bring people closer to God. The traditions weren’t what really mattered. What mattered? The idea that God is present with God’s people. That God is in the common tasks of eating and drinking and laughing and learning and living and talking.

So, what did Jesus do at this point in the story? Jesus criticized the Pharisees’ actions, not the religious traditions. The Pharisees were the ones who were scaring people away from God. They were the ones who put rules over relationship, policies over connections. And by doing so, they were not doing what God wanted. The Pharisees were making people feel inadequate and unloved and excluded. They were abandoning the commandment of God to love others, all for the sake of the trap of human tradition. The line had been drawn and it was the clean on one side and the unclean on the other. It was the righteous on one side and the unrighteous on the other. And I’m sure that’s all that the Pharisees knew. They knew about order and logic and rules, which felt safe. Those of us that are organization freaks and perfectionists, we get it. Traditions provide safety and comfort. But Jesus did what Jesus always does; Jesus changed the rules. Jesus took away the line of separation and seclusion. Jesus, by giving his own body as the food and drink for many, knew that it wasn’t the water that washes away the grit and grime, it was love. Love and fellowship and hospitality blurs and blows away the boundaries we have between us. Jesus knew that our hearts determine our actions, not our actions that determine our hearts. In order of us to change the world, we must first change ourselves.

Keeping track of right and wrong and who is in and who is out is far easier than getting our hands dirty loving the unloved and welcoming the outcast. Hiding behind the walls of our sanctuaries and our systems is easier than welcoming those that the world disinvites. Hiding behind our anger and our anxieties is easier than forgiving the unforgiven. It is easier to hide than

to change. I mean, that is what Jesus and his disciples were doing. They were changing the forms of acceptance and grace. They were doing all those things their traditions told them not to do: touching and healing the sick, freeing people from demons, hanging out with the Gentiles. All these people were considered unclean. Jesus and his disciples lived their lives in the dirt. They were changing the form of closeness and relationship to God. The Pharisees and scribes focused so much on the means and the methods with which to protect the law that they failed to be transformed and changed by the spirit of the law. We still do that. We often don't want to be changed, because change is hard.

You've probably heard the old joke, "How many Baptists does it take to change a light bulb?" "Change? Change? My grandfather donated that lightbulb!" We love our traditions and rules. I love our traditions and rules. They have helped me to navigate and utilize my faith in many ways. But I fear that I come too close to worshiping the traditions instead of the God those traditions point to. And what if Jesus is calling us now, in this time and place, the Christian church, to put its mission of love and power of relationship, of sharing Jesus with all and tearing down the barriers between us... what if Jesus is calling us to put our mission of love ahead of even our most treasured traditions? The bread and the wine at the Last Supper and the body and blood of Jesus's ultimate sacrifice have changed us and have washed away the barriers between us. We, all of us, all of us with dirty hands and dirty hearts, can now come close to the Creator of the universe. If that is not life-changing salvation, I don't know what is.

But sometimes we forget what matters. One commentator I read remembered an article titled something like "Bad Charities: America's Failures." And in this article, it listed thousands of nonprofits that were more about making money than helping those in need. When an investigative reporter confronted one Director and asked how they could justify such selfish and self-centered behavior, his response was, "We started out with a really good idea, helping children in need. But somewhere along the way I guess we got a little greedy and forgot what we were supposed to be doing." They forgot. And sometimes we forget too. We forget that being close to God is about loving our neighbors. We forgot that being close to God is about relationships, not rules. Like the Pharisees, we want to nit-pick and condemn people for not washing their hands, for practicing another religion, for being poor, for not looking like us or acting like us. We judge people's actions and their outsides without considering their hearts.

And that's why this table is so important. This table helps us to not forget. We are reminded every month that the rules and regulations do not define us, but our relationship with God and with each other does. This table transforms our hearts, rather than judges our dirty hands. This table is the food and fellowship that is open to all, because we are all created by God. God uses all parts of us, the good parts and the bad parts, and reminds us that we are all a part of God's world and all deserve love. It's okay to have rituals. It's okay to have traditions. But our rituals and traditions must never become our god. Rituals and traditions will not save us. They will not make us clean. If we want to be clean we must consider, not at what we've built with our hands, but what has changed in our hearts. Being truly clean happens when we reach out our own muddy hands to our fellow church members in this place, when we reach out our own muddy hands to our Dallas community, when we reach out our own muddy hands and pick up those who have fallen in the muck and mire of life, when we reach out our own muddy hands to those in our world who need connection, communion, and love. That is what matters!

So, what matters today? What is truly important? Amy C. Howe at Evergreen Presbyterian Church thinks, “One challenge today is to recognize how we, like the Pharisees, misinterpret what is important to God. Do we look at the dirty fingernails of our homeless sisters and brothers and think to ourselves, ‘They do not belong in our sanctuary?’ Do we hear a baby during the worship service and think to ourselves, or even whisper to our neighbor, ‘Children should not be allowed in worship?’ Do we watch [someone who looks and acts differently than us] join the church and think, ‘They are not welcome here?’ We seem to put our energy into keeping people out of our sanctuaries [and our lives], rather than into examining the sins that stain our own [hearts].” She goes on to say, “Welcoming all into God’s kingdom is important. [Yet], we [simply] want to focus on the mundane because facing the sins that stain our own hands is so painful. However, when we face those sins, letting go of that which is unimportant, and turn to God, we are welcome in the sanctuary and at the table.”

For five weeks we’ve talked about bread. Today, Jesus is saying to us, “Come and break bread with me, even if your hands are dirty. Come, and I will wash your hands and your hearts in the flood of God’s love. Come, and receive that which is my body and blood so that you can go out from here and love all people. Come, because God remembers that we belong to the divine. Come, because God does not forget us, even when the filth and failures of our lives cake and cover our souls. Come, because it is at this table we find what truly matters. Come.

Amen.