

SERMON: Hearts, Hands, and Voices

TEXT: James 1:17-27 Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Confession: several years ago I was going with one of my church elders to deliver communion to our homebound members. I had my little communion kit with me and plenty of bread cut up in small cubes. My plan was to swing by a convenience store to pick up a small bottle of grape juice before our first visit of the afternoon. Well, the elder and I got to talking, and just as we were walking in the door of the assisted living home I realized I had forgotten the grape juice. I didn't want to take time to leave and come back again – it would put us behind schedule and I didn't want to have to cancel any visits if we ran out of time. I began searching the lobby and the common areas for a soda machine.

Yes, I used Dr. Pepper instead of grape juice to symbolize the blood of Jesus! Fortunately, our first visit was to a man who was a big fan of Dr. Pepper and always had a big stash of it stacked up in a corner of his room. Now, I've told this story before, and people usually respond with laughter and give me credit for quick and creative thinking. However, it would not be too surprising if someone had a problem with this. In fact, I met a man once who took issue with the fact that we used grape juice in the Presbyterian church instead of wine.

Communion is a sacrament, after all, and it ought to be administered in a dignified manner, decently and in order. So, if using Dr. Pepper seems undignified – if the symbol takes our attention away from that which it symbolizes – it may have been a bad decision on my part. On the other hand, my mind was thinking I had two options: Dr. Pepper or no communion at all. Of course, there were more options than that, but it's what I felt limited to at the time. I chose to provide communion, and I served bread and Dr. Pepper.

From the Gospel of Mark, we read about the scribes and Pharisees who accused Jesus of breaking tradition when he allowed his disciples to eat without washing their hands. They questioned him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”

All the parents and grandparents in the room are probably apt to agree with the Pharisees in this case. In my house, nobody sat down at the table before washing their hands first! For us, it was more about hygiene than tradition. And for the Pharisees it was about purity and worthiness.

One commentary pointed out that several English translations of this passage miss the mark in their choice of words to describe the hands of the disciples. This

scholar writes, “The Greek word *koinos* does not in itself mean ‘defiled’ (NRSV, REB) or ‘unclean’ (NIV). It is the word for ‘common,’ that is, ‘ordinary.’ The Pharisees believed that food should be eaten with sanctified hands, not ordinary hands.”

(Douglas R.A. Hare, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 4)

In response to their question, Jesus accused the Pharisees, using the words of Isaiah, *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,” Jesus explained, “and hold to human tradition.”

Back to the Biblical scholar, “Jesus declares that it is not scrupulous observance of the food laws that makes Israel holy, but morality.” (Douglas R.A. Hare, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 4)

All of this talk of tradition and ritual reminded me of the opening song in one of my all-time favorite musicals, *Fiddler on the Roof*. Tradition! Tevye, a faithful Jewish man with five daughters sings passionately about tradition. He explains that tradition tells them how to sleep, how to eat, how to work, and what clothes to wear. Because of tradition, they know who they are and what God expects. He even speaks to the audience, “Where does this tradition come from, you ask? I will tell you. I don’t know.”

As the story progresses, each of his three eldest daughters challenges his beloved and long-held traditions. Tzeitel begs her father to allow her to choose her husband, a poor tailor, rather than marry the matchmaker's pick: a widower about 50 years her senior, but, more importantly, a wealthy butcher who can provide a good life for her.

Tevye's initial reaction is No! But as his daughter and her beloved continue to plead their case, Tevye begins to listen. We are privy to his thoughts as he weighs the pros and cons of their requests. "He's beginning to talk like a man. On the other hand, what kind of a match would that be with a poor tailor? On the other hand, he's a hard worker. On the other hand, he has absolutely nothing. On the other hand, things could never get worse for him, they could only get better."

Finally, Tevye relents, honoring the love of the young couple and his own love for his daughter over his sacred traditions.

Jill Duffield is a Presbyterian pastor and Editor of the Presbyterian Outlook magazine. She sends out a weekly email called *Looking at the Lectionary*, in which she offers her reflections on the passages for the following Sunday. I want

to share with you what she wrote about the passage in Mark about tradition: “Keep in mind that this story comes in Mark just after Jesus has been lauded in a Jewish part of the world and is about to embark on a major mission to the Gentiles. This hand-washing question is not theoretical to those who are asking it and Jesus' answer has consequences for his ministry and that of his disciples. This question about tradition is bigger than righteous rule-following; this is about expanding membership in the family of God. This isn't really about whose hands are dirty, it is about which people we name as unclean. Jesus is not saying jettison all the law, he says he has come to fulfill it after all. He is giving notice to the Pharisees and any others who want to limit God's grace, concern and community, that no ritual, tradition or religious practice should be used to constrain the will and work of the Most High.”

Traditions are rituals are supposed to help us practice our faith and grow our faith, to bring people closer to God and to glorify God. Duffield wrote, “Jesus says that when those traditions are used as an excuse to exclude or abuse, marginalize or ridicule, they enrage the God they are designed to glorify.”

In the Letter of James we read, “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” You know, “practice what you preach.” “If

you're going to talk the talk, you've got to walk the walk." "Actions speak louder than words."

We cannot separate our words from our actions. That whole idea of parents who say, "Do as I say, not as I do" – that doesn't fly. It's hypocritical. It's like saying "honesty is the best policy," and then telling lies. It's like priests who preach about Jesus blessing the children, and then abuse them behind closed doors. If your words don't match your actions, it's a problem. Of course, we're all guilty. We're good at pointing our finger at all the hypocrites around us, but we forget that at the same time, three fingers are pointing back at us.

You're probably familiar with the children's card game in which the cards have pictures of people and animals, but only the top half or bottom half. It's funny – and can provide hours of laughter – to put a giraffe's neck and head on human legs, or a person's head on a flamingo's body. But the real object of the game is to match the cards to make a full person or to make sure the tiger's head ends up with the tiger's body. In the same way, our objective in life and faith is to make sure what we say with our voices matches what we do with our hands and that both match what we believe in our hearts.

When you come to the Lord's Table today, no one will be checking to see whether your hands are clean or if you're dressed properly or whether you've fulfilled your financial pledge to the church. But what God is looking for is a pure heart and a desire to serve and love God and neighbor.

May the beliefs of our hearts, the actions of our hands, and the words of our voices be true to God's call upon our lives, and be given for the glory of God!

AMEN.