

Sermon  
Matthew 15:10-20  
The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
October 1, 2023  
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Leading up to our text for today, Jesus has feed the five thousand, Peter has walked on water, the disciples and their teacher have been healing and ministering to crowds. The Pharisees have approached Jesus and called into question his faithfulness to the Jewish Law. Just a few verses before our text, they are asking him why he and his friends are breaking tradition by not washing their hands before they eat. In a quick response, Jesus challenges them right back by asking, “Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?” He goes on, giving an example of the commandment to honor one’s parents and pointing out that despite this, they would forfeit giving to one’s own parents because of their obligation to give to God. Jesus concludes this interaction with a cutting line, “So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God.”<sup>7</sup> You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said: “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; <sup>9</sup> in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.” It’s at this point he turns his attention to the crowds and the disciples and our main text for today picks up at verse 10: “Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand: <sup>11</sup> it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” <sup>12</sup> Then the disciples approached and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?” <sup>13</sup> He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. <sup>14</sup> Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. a And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.” <sup>15</sup> But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.” <sup>16</sup> Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding? <sup>17</sup> Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? <sup>18</sup> But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. <sup>19</sup> For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. <sup>20</sup> These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

So, what’s going on here? At a first read, it’s easy to assume it’s another duel between the Pharisees and Jesus in which the Pharisees are cast as the “villain” and Jesus is the wise “hero”. The Pharisees are at it again, doing their best to misuse their power and shut down the ministry of Jesus, but as always, Jesus being the perfect Son of God, beats them at their own game and they run away with their tail between their legs. Another day of fighting off the pesky religious leaders is won and done! But what’s sad and scary is that the underlying narrative of that approach is that the Jewish tradition is wrong, bad, sinful even. What is dangerous about that line of thinking is it all at once diminishes the Jewish identity of the Christ by pitting him against the religious leaders of his day and it has led to the erasure, the mistreatment, and even the murder of our Jewish siblings. Let us not forget the 11 lives that were taken just this summer in Pittsburgh fueled by anti-Semitic rhetoric.

This gruesome threat to our Jewish siblings is so prevalent that when I referred to Wilda Gafney's Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church, she chose to exclude the portions of this text about the Pharisees and says she, "omits the critique of the Pharisees as anti-pharisaic rhetoric in the Christian Scriptures and its interpretation are often unnecessarily anti-Semitic". It is this stark reality that almost resulted in my own omission of this portion of the text. But as I dug deeper into my research and preparation, I felt the conviction that rather than choosing between declaring a message that harms my Jewish friends and neighbors or taking out the part of this story that involves their tradition altogether...perhaps there is a deeper lesson for us that involves honoring the rich Jewish heritage AND learning from it in the context of this passage in Matthew. Maybe we'll see that we ourselves are not all that different from the Pharisees.

Let's begin by diving a bit deeper into some of these traditions. The ritual hand washing that the Pharisees question Jesus about is a part of cleanliness laws. Going all the way back to the Torah, the laws were set in place by God for the Israelites to abide by. These standards were not simply for hygienic purposes, but as one Jewish scholar notes, they were in place to separate the Israelites from the context they found themselves in. All throughout Scripture and history, the Jewish people have repeatedly found themselves exiled or dispersed. Repeated threats of extinction to their very existence have loomed. When we get to Matthew, we are wise to remember that the Jewish people are under Roman rule. So, just as before, the need to separate themselves by the ways they live as a means of preserving their tradition, their people, their very identity, and their relationship to God is of utmost importance. Looking at this way, it is more than understandable why the Pharisees would be so quick to correct those Jewish citizens who are not abiding by a hand-washing law. Their actions are often assumed to be measures of control, but perhaps their actions indicate care and concern for their people and their faith.

In her lectionary, Wilda Gafney echoes this by noting that despite common belief, "as a fellow Jewish scholar", Jesus respected the stance of the Pharisees even in his disagreements with them. And he agreed with them more than he disagreed with them. So, when Jesus is telling the disciples to ignore the Pharisees, I don't believe that at all that he is undermining them or their shared Jewish traditions. Instead, I agree with Gafney, who says that Jesus is challenging the Pharisees for not living up to the standards they are holding others accountable to. Jesus is not suggesting they throw tradition out the window all together, rather as Amy-Jill Levine notes, he is saying that, "spiritual purity is more important than physical purity of the body". In this moment, Jesus is disagreeing not with the entirety of the Pharisees belief system but that they are placing these physical laws themselves above their intended spiritual purpose and doing so, acting with hypocrisy.

So, in telling the disciples to ignore the Pharisees and that it's not what goes in the mouth but what comes out that has the power to defile a person, I do not believe at all that Jesus is commanding his followers to reject the Pharisees completely or to not follow the cleanliness laws. But, I do think he is saying that if in following such laws, their intended purpose is lost, then those laws end up getting broken anyway and those who enforce the laws make hypocrites of themselves.

I wonder if we at Seattle First ever fall into the same pit? We have all sorts of traditions here. Some that have roots in our church's historical place in Seattle, some that are tied to our identity in the Evergreen Association, still others that are a part of our American Baptist Heritage. We have our kinds of rituals like monthly communion and weekly coffee hour. And we have our own kind of laws, but we call them our church values. All of these markers we've set in place as means of fulfilling the call to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. And while these are good and beautiful and holy, I have to also wonder if there are ways in which these guide posts we use to do good have at all become traps of hypocrisy? Do we, in our pursuit of what is right ever end up upholding mere performative acts of justice? With our intent to include others in a transformative journey, do we ever find ourselves caring more about their conformity to our ideals than their mental or emotional wellbeing? Are we like the Pharisees, taking meaningful and good rituals and traditions and blindly using them as weapons instead of tools? It's all too easy to miss the best intentions of the Pharisees and treat their efforts to maintain purity as nothing more than tyrannical acts of control but miss how our well-intentioned actions towards justice might become hinderances and dead ends rather than avenues to liberation.

Beloved, my prayer for us this morning is that we would not be so consumed with maintaining our standards that we instead wind up betraying them. Let us be humble enough to recognize that we have blind spots and open to being shown what they are. Let us continually revisit the ways we have promised to be in the world and how we witness to the work of the Divine. Let us be slow to criticize those who we assume are not following the way of God, lest we find out that it is us who have strayed. Let us be a people who hold fast to the traditions that aide us in embodying our convictions and let us be faithful in living them out. Let us be a community that is known for love and empathy and in doing so, honor the reflection of God in all of creation. Amen.

**Sources:**

The Jewish Annotated New Testament: Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Z. Brettler  
Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church, Year A: Wilda Gafney

**Benediction:** As we go out from this place, may we honor those rhythms and traditions that shape who we are and how we are. May we use them to include and affirm, to uplift and encourage. May we be quick to see when they are shifting from tools into weapons and may we let the love of all that is Holy help us to return them to their proper state. May our hearts be turned and returned to the source of Love and may we live our lives in ways that invite others to join us as we navigate the path of Life with curiosity and humility. And may it ever be so. Amen.