

“What Comes from Within”
Rev. Emily Wilmarth, First Presbyterian Church of Highlands, NC
Sunday, September 2, 2018
Mark 7:1-23

You might be familiar with the author Anne Lamott, a recovering alcoholic and drug addict. Lamott has written extensively, honestly, and humorously about her journey through addiction and recovery. Saint Andrew, a small Presbyterian congregation in Marin City, California is often featured in her writing because this church was and remains a major part of her walk into and daily through sobriety.

One of her books *Operating Instructions*, details her first year of raising her son as a single mom. In it, she describes the first time she took Sam to church.

When Sam was six days old, I took him to ... the church where I've been hanging out for four years now ... I got in the habit of stopping by the church on Sundays but staying in the back, in this tense, lurky, way, and leaving before the service was over because I didn't want people to touch me, or hug me, or try to make me feel better about myself. After I got sober and started to feel okay about myself, I could stay to the end and get hugged ... Anyway, the first Sunday after Sam's birth, I kind of limped in ... and everyone was staring joyfully and almost brokenheartedly at us because they loved us so much. I walked in, like a ship about to go down, to a seat in the back. but the pastor said, Whoa, whoa, not so fast - you come up here and introduce him to his new family. So, I limped up to the little communion table in the front of the half circle of folding chairs where we sit, and I turned to face everyone. The pain and joy were just overwhelming. I tried to stammer, "This is my son," but my lip was trembling, my whole face was trembling, and everyone was crying. When I'd first started coming to the church, I couldn't even stand up for half the songs because I'd be so sick from cocaine and alcohol that my head would be spinning, but these people were so confused that they'd thought I was a child of God.ⁱ

She goes on to talk about how during her pregnancy church members would sneak her money, sometimes walking up to her and shoving twenty-dollar bills in her pocket. These folks who themselves lived on fixed income and tiny pensions were doing everything they could to help her.

This story touches my heart so deeply - maybe yours, too - because it is a story of redemption. In many ways, this church helped save Anne Lamott's life. It's a story of acceptance, of generosity, of the kind of love Jesus commands. It's a story about breaking down walls and barriers to put that kind of love into practice.

Just think. When Anne Lamott first walked through the doors of that church, there wasn't much "churchy" about her. She couldn't even stand up straight in worship. She didn't look right, didn't behave right, didn't live right. In fact, from the way she tells it, there wasn't much "right" about her at all. Whether or not the congregation felt this way, Lamott definitely felt as though she stood out like a sore thumb in the middle of church. She felt like someone like her didn't, couldn't really belong there.

When the Pharisees and scribes go to Jesus in our text today, it is because they feel like Jesus and his disciples stand out like sore thumbs, too. You see, Jesus and his disciples were not very churchy, at least according to the customs and expectations of Jewish adherents in their day. At that point in his ministry, there were plenty of things Jesus was doing and teaching (or not doing and teaching) that were unbecoming of a good Jewish rabbi. Working on the Sabbath, touching impure people to heal them, eating with sinners, to name a few.

In this particular moment, the Pharisees and scribes hone in on his disciples' failure to wash their hands before meals.

Hand washing, of course, is a lovely habit. A life-saving habit, in fact. But the hand washing the Pharisees and scribes were talking about was less concerned with germs and more concerned with holiness. The ritual was about purity, about cleansing oneself of the world's grime and dirt to be pure and holy before God. These rituals and traditions, like so many of our own Christian rituals, weren't always direct commandments from God in scripture. But they were handed down by those priestly leaders to guide the people to a closer walk with God.

The trouble with rituals and traditions, though, is that they can quickly turn from practices intended to honor and glorify God into markers of, or qualifiers for the faith. They can become a measuring stick for judging just how good, or right, God's people are really behaving. That's where the question of adherence comes in about the case of Jesus' disciples. "Why aren't they behaving according to the traditions handed down by the elders?" Of course, it's not an innocent question. It's meant to dig at Jesus. To undermine his leadership. To point out just how wrong, how unholy he and his followers were behaving.

You don't find yourself bearing the title Presbyterian pastor if you don't love a few traditions and rituals. What I love about them is their familiarity. I love the way our rituals and traditions in the church draw people together into something we can share in common. They give us a sense of comfort. They help us know what to expect. And at their best, our rituals and traditions in the church help us draw closer to the heart of God. They engage us in behaviors and activities that set our faith lives apart from common life.

Prayer before a meal, for example, gives us a chance to pause, reflect, and to take a deep breath, to express gratitude to God. Worship on Sundays is another example. It's time to be together as a family of faith, to support one another, to build each other up. It's time to focus our minds and our hearts on God. Which sounds like the most basic thing. But how often during the week is your mind focused on God's presence in your life and activity in the world? How often during the week do you sing hymns? Or pass not just a friendly hello, but *Christ's peace* to another person?

Our traditions and rituals can help us know and claim our identity as the body of Christ. They help us know who we are as God's people. They help us grow deeper into discipleship, deeper into knowledge and awareness of our faith. They help us follow Jesus's commandments to love God, our neighbors, and ourselves. And that's a good thing.

But, they can also get us in trouble. Because we get so comfortable, so familiar with traditions that we forget what they're about, what they're for. For example, we can forget that for the most part, we've adapted our rituals over time. We've made them our own, shaping and molding them to our needs and convenience, to our values and beliefs. And that's not necessarily all bad. If we didn't, it would be Curtis up here. And he'd be speaking in Latin.

The trouble lies in confusing the human-made traditions from the God given commandments. We get in trouble when we start to believe that *our way* of doing things, *our* rituals, *our* traditions make *us* holy. And if others don't conform to our customs, then they're not doing it right by God. And they certainly aren't holy. When we start to believe that God judges others how we judge others, then we can be sure we've crafted God in our own image.

Jesus calls the Pharisees and scribes hypocrites, a word that means "actors." *You play the part with your lips*, he says, *but your hearts are far from me. You worship in vain, but your rules are merely human rules.* The problem was not necessarily their rituals themselves. The problem was what was behind their rituals; what was in their hearts.

This gospel passage is a reminder for us. Rather than merely pointing fingers at the Pharisees and scribes (which would be taking a page out of their book), we can use this lesson to look closely at our own traditions and rituals. And more importantly, to look deeply into our hearts. To really do some introspection and ask if all we are doing in Christian lives is rooted in Christ's commandment to love. Or, do we live out our Christian practice according to our own vanity? Do our traditions and rituals bring us to a closer walk with God? Or do they lead us down a path of self-righteousness or tribalism?

There's a real challenge for us in this text. Our faith comes from our hearts. It comes from the depth of who we are. It's not just what we do on the outside that makes us Christians. It's who we are in the inside, in our hearts. And as Jesus reminds us, there are things in our hearts that defile. Or, another way to say it, there are things in our hearts that take us further and further away from the heart of God. It's our pride, our avarice, our deceit and envy and slander. It's our desire to steal the livelihood of others for our own benefit, and our capacity to lie to our loved ones. It's these things that drive a wedge between us and God.

But we also have in our hearts that which is beautiful and sanctified. What we have in our hearts is holy. We all have the capacity to love. To embrace and welcome. To see past appearances and differences, to see past faults, to forgive and reconcile with others. We have in our hearts the ability to break down walls that separate or isolate people who go about their lives feeling like sore thumbs: broken, ashamed, unclean, other. We have in our hearts a desire to know and be in relationship with the Divine. Our challenge is to pour out these holy gifts, these things that draw us into the heart of God, into our faith lives, and into our traditions and our rituals.

We can begin by paying attention, by honestly considering if all we do and say as Christian people, is really for Christ's sake.

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Asheville recently took a hard look at one of their own traditions and discovered they were coming up short when it comes to loving their neighbors. Not unlike our church, they have a funding process for their mission partners, in which organizations apply through a grant process. Included in the procedure was a requirement that at least one church member had to sponsor the application. What they realized was that as a majority white congregation, their church members were not necessarily engaged or involved in a wider depth and breadth of organizations serving the city of Asheville. The design of their procedure, whether intentionally or not, excluded particular demographics in the community. Changing their procedure yielded 21 new mission partners, mostly in neighborhoods of need that the church didn't previously serve.

I said there was a challenge for us in this text. I think there is encouragement for us, too. Encouragement to take time, to take effort to look deep within your heart. Encouragement to keep walking this path of discipleship, knowing that we don't always get it right, but we can change. And encouragement because of this truth: God will always be seeking us, calling to us, drawing us closer to God's heart. And we can follow where God calls.

ⁱ Anne Lamott, *Operating Instructions* (Fawcett Columbine: New York), 27-28.