

There's Laws and Then There's Laws
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

It appears that a fight broke out, and it was a fight between the pharisees and their scholars, the scribes and Jesus. It was a fight for honour, and we've got to know how skilled Jesus was at this kind of fight. The pharisees routinely spy on Jesus and his disciples so that they can challenge Jesus' growing honourable reputation. Remember, honour is an actual currency in the first century middle east. Jesus was getting really rich in honour!

Challenges to honour were very common and every question was a challenge, if for no other reason than the subject may not know the answer or be forced to lie. And remember, a challenge was never made to an inferior, only an equal. This is one way we know that Jesus had status in the Temple.

In this reading, the pharisees are challenging Jesus' disciples' failure to observe the Great Tradition with the question:

"Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?"

This 'great tradition of the elders' is a set of practices designed, maintained and practiced by elites who lived in the cities and the Pharisees required that everyone observed this urban tradition. For peasants ... that would be most people ... in the desert countryside, and itinerants, like Jesus, water was scarce and not readily available for washing. Rural peasants, then ... again, mostly everybody... had developed a tradition called "the Little Tradition", that served their situation better. But that's not what the Pharisees were really after.

This situation of 'honour challenge' in which Jesus found himself was not new or irregular and Jesus was very good at it! His next move in this ancient game of chess, was to hurl a counter challenge at the Pharisees in the form of an insult. Not only an insult, but an insult while quoting scripture. Jesus was very good at this.

Out comes Isaiah 29:13

' These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. ⁷ They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules."

Jesus leaps over the Great and Little Tradition issue right to the heart of the issue.

"Their teachings are merely human rules. ⁸ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions."

These traditions are so important that they feel like worship. WOW ... The Pharisees are not following the Torah, laws of Moses, delivered to the people from God! But they value their human traditions more. More than the Torah.

The scorekeeping in an honour challenge is with the crowd who invariably gathered to watch the match. So, Jesus calls directly to the crowd to acknowledge and drive home his win over the Pharisees.

“Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. ¹⁵ Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.” ²¹ For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²² adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. ²³ All these evils come from inside and defile a person.”

God wins AGAIN! Go Jesus!

People are worshipping God with their lips and these traditions, but not with their hearts. What are not traditions, were probably at one time close to the instructions of God, but over time, we get all attached and worshipping the tradition.

I was raised to wash my hands before I ate and especially since Covid we may be a little more attuned to washing our hands. But this handwashing, although it may have been a healthy practice, wasn’t even what Jesus we upset about. Jesus was upset because the tradition of handwashing had become a way of separating people ... poor people from rich people, Israelites from Gentiles.

Being told how to behave by our cultural rules can never separate us from God and God’s people. AND ALL people are God’s people.

Over time we Christians have had some rules ... whether we dance, or go to movies, when you have a baby, how much work you are allowed to do on the Sabbath, or who you love and who you marry. I suspect these rules were all for our protection, based in somebody’s interpretation of the scripture, and meant to bring us closer to God.

So, how do we get from a simple rule to Jesus’ instruction that

“Nothing from outside can defile by going into them”.

But isn’t it true that these rules are outside and by our dogged determination to hold on to tradition at any cost that they we are defiled by them? Lots of things ‘outside’ defile. War defiles us, homelessness defiles us...

But Jesus continues ...

Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.” ²¹ For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come.”

And then we get a list of all the things that our hearts can be turned to...

“...sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²² adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. ²³ All these evils come from inside and defile a person.”

Yes, all of them defile our hearts if we are not on guard for the ‘human rules that we might be worshipping’, that might be tainting our hearts.

NOW, where are you and I in all of this?

From the ancient world of the Prophet Isaiah (yes this has been going on a long, long time)

“They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.

The status quo ... such a dangerous place to be. Such a comfortable place, but yes ... a dangerous place. Which becomes more important ... “this is the way we do it”? or “I am making somebody unhappy by the way I do it”

How can we jump out of the water we swim in long enough to look around and see if we have left some people on the beach because of the ‘assuredness of our correctness’?

We can begin by asking questions of those things that ‘are just the way’ ... the status quo. This isn’t easy because these things are just ‘our way’ and the ‘the way that works.’ Or does it?

We can begin by asking little questions of the status quo ... “I wonder what it would be like to sit in a different pew?” “I wonder what it would be like to go to the grocery store a different way?” “I wonder how much kale I could actually eat?” “I wonder how a new hairdo would work?” ... maybe that’s to far...

And then we might grow into larger questions ...

A friend of mine had become the manager of circulation for a newspaper (yes a while ago now) and she was pretty excited so she went through the department looking at ‘systems’ and figuring out how things were done. She came across a colleague placing ‘happy face stickers’ on pieces of paper and passing them on to the next desk. My friend asked, “What are the happy face stickers for?”. Well, the lady of the ‘stickers’ didn’t really know, but it was her job to place them and pass them along. So, Sharon starts asking around. It took a while, but it turns out that the stickers were part of a campaign that the paper had run a few years earlier, long over, but nobody had stopped the Happy Face stickers ... so they just continued. Now, taking that job away from the person who was doing it was not easy because it was her job. But eventually the Happy Faces were no longer needed. Some feel the loss of the Happy Faces to this day.

I have had a trait for most of my life that has often gotten me into trouble but as we discuss this topic today I’ll confess it to you. Some of you will recognize it... I have always had this way down deep feeling the rules are only guidelines and they are often for other people. And I know other people who see the world that way, too.

Sometimes it can feel like trouble, but I simply find myself questioning a lot. I feel that I’m convinced that if this is our way, there is probably a better way.

The key here isn’t necessarily radical change. But really, it’s just about not assuming that the current way is the best way ... or God’s way ... for today or for tomorrow.

Then when we get a little practice, we can ask questions of bigger systems like capitalism. Should the needs of shareholder devastate viable businesses. Surely this can’t be the only way that people can be prosperous. What might be a better way?

Then overarching that question ... When we begin to understand that the first rule of economics is scarcity can we question “How does a belief in scarcity affect us and our hearts? Does a belief in scarcity, as espoused by the laws of economics, slam us with the absence of prosperity. God wants us all to enjoy prosperity ... the Psalms tell us that ... what is keeping some people from prosperity? If we succumb to the ‘rule’ and start

believing in scarcity, does a belief in scarcity 'defile our hearts' and bring 'greed'? What are the other rules of a world based in Economy that we might be questioning? All good questions.

Another interesting question in Canada ... "Why is it that Indigenous people are overrepresented in our prisons? Have we just come to understand that 'this is simply how it is?'"

Ask the questions, wonder if the rules that we have bought into, or agreed with for some good reason once upon a time ... might not working anymore? Or are even working against us now?

And even if you don't have a question but somebody else asks a question, wonder with them. If somebody is not being served, then none of us can rest. Growth is all about change. Things that are dead don't change but things that are alive change constantly.

What are the basic rules? God gave Moses the 10 commandments ... Jesus gave us "Love God and love your neighbour". Now those laws are pretty far-reaching, but we seem to find a world outside of those God Laws, and even how we operate inside them sometimes, that are pretty much subject to the equivalent to 'the great tradition' of our cultures and should be questioned.

Economics, bible interpretation, governments, systems of community order... all subject to questioning and scrutiny. Always be suspicious that the old self didn't necessarily understand what the emerging self would need. Donkeys to cell phones ... horse and buggy to spaceships. It's a journey.

We have a 'status quo' thing happening right here at MacNeill. It's about the practice of Communion. The 'way we do it' is great for some and not so great for others ... and still others would like to think about adding some components. Thankfully, people were brave enough to step up with their feelings, and other brave people listened to those feelings, and we will talk. I ask you to join the conversation ... please tap me on the arm today that you would like to join and begin asking the questions that will bring us to a new place in this foundational sacrament. This is our home, and we owe it the duty of scrutiny.

As I close, I ask one last question... well for now.

Is there any place in our hearts that are defiled by the adherence to a human rule? God gave us the strength and the reason to question those human rules to ask constantly, "Is it hurting me? Is it hurting anyone?"

From the poetry of Candace Jones, on the cover of our Order of Service today, I offer the words from the spirit of Jesus ...

Strict rules you've set for humankind
laborious by your design,
You focus on life's earthly tasks...
I see beyond your arrogant masks.
With blameless hearts they dwell with me
and shall throughout eternity."

END ... in the name of the Father, the son and holy spirit... AMEN