

Relationships over Religiosity
Preached 9/15/24 By Rev. Ridgley Joyner
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

We have had a rough week. After the news was shared on Thursday about a child of the church, our beloved Laura Jean McClintick, our minds have been elsewhere. Many of us here are numb, wondering if we have any tears left to cry. Some of us are angry, angry at God, angry at the world, just plain angry. Some of us are drowning in questions surrounding her death. Some never knew Laura Jean but are aching at the thought of their friends John and Barbara losing a child that meant so much to them.

We have had a rough week. And so sitting down and reading a passage about Jesus not washing his hands before eating, just feels kinda pointless to talk about. When death and grief infiltrates our lives, we begin to question every motivation, every thing our days are filled with. Does this even matter? What's the point? It's easy to read our passage and think that Jesus is saying the same thing about tradition.

Our passage begins shortly after Jesus's miracle of feeding 5,000 hungry people. What follows is a mealtime debate on washing hands. We read that the Pharisees and scribes gathered around Jesus and noticed that the disciples were eating without having washed their hands. Now, for us, we think of cleanliness, right? During the pandemic there was a LOT of shaming around washing hands and how we wash hands and when. That's not what this passage is talking about—dirty hands—the issue here is with ritual purity.

In Exodus, God told the people of Israel that there are to be “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” amongst other nations and they took it very seriously. Pharisees believed that God's choosing of God's people was a gift meant to be treated reverently. They believed that God gave them the law to help order their way of life together. One of which was the ritual washing of

hands before eating. Priests serving in the temple were required to wash their hands before entering a holy place or offering a sacrifice. Pharisees interpreted these laws to apply to all God's people in all aspects of life—all Pharisees believed that all Jews should wash their hands before meals as a way of making mealtime sacred. By washing their hands, they were following deeply held traditions and faithfulness that set them apart from others in the Roman empire.¹

So, as you can imagine, when the Pharisees and scribes came across Jesus and his disciples eating without having washed their hands, it was concerning. They seemed careless and their actions appeared to disregard these deeply held traditions, thus in many ways disregarding God's laws. They genuinely wanted to know why the disciples didn't follow the traditions of the elders.

Jesus draws them back to the word of the Lord through the prophet Isaiah from Isaiah 48—where the people of God are fasting for the sole purpose of God seeing and noticing them. And yet, are exploiting workers, quarreling with one another. Isaiah prophecies that fasting for the sake of fasting is in vain—God wants them (and us) to do the type of fasting that loosens the chains of injustice and set the oppressed free, breaking every yoke, sharing the food with the hungry, providing shelter for the wanderer and clothing the naked.

Jesus's answer is very clear: you can honor God with your traditions and rituals, but it is in vain if you do it just to do it. He calls attention to their hearts—it isn't about what is going in and out of your body that matters to God—what matters to God is what is coming out of your heart—and it can be one of two things—hate, exclusion, division OR love, compassion, care.

They had become preoccupied with the external act of faithfulness and it

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-22-2/commentary-on-mark-71-8-14-15-21-23-3>

distracted them from examining their own hearts' faithfulness. Instead of expressing holiness and regarding a meal as sacred and a gift from God, it became a means of exclusion. Ritual and religiosity had become more important than relationships.

Now, it is easy for us to think “typical pharisees at it again, obsessed with the law”. But I believe we have more in common with them than we realize. It is far too easy to become people who are attempting to live faithfully by focusing on our HOW enacting practices and focusing far too much on traditions and rituals rather than examining our WHY.

Having an experience where God's love was tangible, being a part of a community of faith, communing with God in prayer and reading God's word ARE NOT BAD THINGS. But when those things become the way we divide ourselves from others and fail to love God, ourselves, and neighbor that's when we need refocusing.

Humans love ritual, order, practice. It the way we understand the world. We are do-ers. These are not bad things. What Jesus is talking about here is the danger of turning the way we live together into a commandment more than the commandment that Jesus gives to love God and love neighbor. It is then that we lost the whole point of faithfulness. Piety can get in the way of fulfilling the WHY of what we do—to love God with all our hearts, minds, souls and strength and loving our neighbor as ourselves.

To Jesus true faithfulness is daring to touch the unclean, daring to love the social outcasts, loving and serving all people, not just the ones we are most comfortable caring for. True faithfulness isn't about clean hands, but a heart cleansed and a life shaped by the radical, self-giving love of God in Jesus Christ.

I am a kinesthetic learner—so the way I experience God is often through experiences. You may notice that worship services I lead like the Longest night, a healing and wholeness service, a Lenten series may have very tangible learning experiences and practices. I love holding something when I pray. I

love breaking bread with my church family. But, it is often that those programs and practices become my focus, and not the God that they connect me to.

Because of that, you will see your associate pastor pouring herself into the how's of our life together. Making a manual? Here for it. Bringing life and structure to an idea to bring it into fruition, YES. I love the HOWS of church life. When I went to seminary, I realized just how many traditions and processes were embedded in our life together as Presbyterians. Suddenly, I had an intentional theological base to something as simple as how we order worship, how we talk about God, the hymns we sing, the life and ministry of the church.

We are people with deeply held traditions that have shaped us and enabled our life together. And in seasons of change and transition like our life post covid, it can be hard to examine them for their WHY and rechart our life together. There is a presbyterian joke that is often said about how we love to do things decently and in order. How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb? Wait, we have to form a committee first.

We can joke all we want, but we don't just do what we do how we do it for the heck of it. There are intentional reasons for our way of life together. BUT when we are not connected to the WHY of HOW we live together, we can get caught up in prioritizing religiosity over relationships.

On Monday, I sat through 3 hours of meetings after my 8 hour work day. One for Faith Formation and 2 hours of a Session meeting. Doing IMPORTANT work. And the next night, I spent two hours with our youth at table, breaking bread, reuniting after our week at Montreat. Laughing until we cried, remembering our experiences together. One youth said "man, I am so glad I came tonight, ya'll. I have had such a bad day. You all made it so much better.

We must remember our why. These traditions, these meetings, these tasks forces, they all matter—they all are how we seek to be faithful and intentional children of God in our life together.

But we must remember that these traditions, these meetings and alllll these details made a life together where memories are made, where children and youth AND adults know they are loved, know that they can weather life together.

When people started coming back to church after the pandemic, people weren't putting out signs that said "come to Sunday school, be an usher, come to a Trustees meeting". They said "you are not alone" "All are welcome" "you matter" because the purpose of church isn't to be another organization. The purpose of church is to come in the doors and be a part of a family, where you are reminded of God's love for you and where you can experience the life changing relationships of the faithful that aren't always your biological family.

And weeks like this one, when tragedy hits inside the doors of this church family, we are reminded why we do what we do.

When people ask me "why go to church" I always tell them that being a part of a church isn't about the traditions and rituals, but the relationships.

On Thursday afternoon, some of you gathered with me in the sanctuary and we went through pictures of coffee hours, mission trips, youth group. And what we saw was the huge smiles on Laura Jean's face. We didn't remember how hard it was to find the coffee hour volunteers or how many meetings went into planning the burger corn roast. We remembered the joy on the faces of the church members in those photos.

We shared stories and memories of Laura Jean's life here at St. John's the light and joy she brought into our lives and we laughed together. What a gift it was for us to have one another. To know God's love through our love for her and her love for her church family.

It is immense privilege and meaningful calling it is to be a community of faith, the church, God's Children. It is an even bigger privilege to love each other and our children with such love, such empathy. We can get caught up in the religiosity-- worship each week, or committees, or volunteer needs and we forget what's here: the gift God has given us—each other, the relationships. We are heartbroken. And this week, none of the details matter. Jesus came to show us that all the details, as important as they may seem, are second to loving God with all your heart, all your mind, all your strength and loving your neighbor, loving your people as yourself.

Thanks be to God for Laura Jean, Thanks be to God for this church family. And thanks be to God for bringing us all together day in and day out to figure all this hard stuff out. May God give us the strength to hug each other tight and may God give us the strength to continue our work in a way that makes space for relationships and memories we will never forget.