

Text: Mark 7: 1-23
Title: Inside Out
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Ed Dobson was the prominent pastor of a big box church in Grand Rapids. He is a good and gentle hearted preacher, an active religious right political voice, and a celebrated author. He was diagnosed with ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease) and his book, "Prayers and Promises When Facing a Life Threatening Illness" has been a help to many.

In his retirement Ed Dobson decided to live like Jesus for a year. After reading "The Year of Living Biblically," the best-selling account of one mans attempt at obeying biblical commands as literally as possible, Dobson decided that if a non-religious Jew could do it so could a practicing Christian.

And with that he set out to follow Old Testament laws about diet, clothing, and behavior. He ate kosher; he celebrated Jewish holidays; he prayed at a synagogue; he refrained from work and travel on the Sabbath ~ with the occasional exception of his grandchildren's soccer games. He obeyed the commandment about not trimming beards and grew one as long and shaggy as an Orthodox rabbi. And, he re-read the four gospels each week for a year.

All of this would have been a quirky-quiet-experiment leading to a deeper understanding of the way of Jesus except that when Dobson was interviewed by USA Today and appeared on "Good Morning America" he acknowledged that in trying to live like Jesus he had on occasion drank beer in a bar and voted for Barack Obama. (Gasp!)

Those admissions stirred-up a stink storm. He was criticized for swigging swill in part because he was also the volunteer "Vice President for Spiritual Formation" at Cornerstone University – a school that prohibits drinking by faculty or students. And, he was chastised about his vote because Obama's positions didn't meet a certain pro-life criteria.

Now, I don't want to get sidetracked with either the criticism or Dobson's defense, but clearly there were markers that for some folks defined faithfulness. In attempting to live more "jewishly" like Jesus Dobson offended those who thought his actions weren't Christ-like. His actions of faith clouded, confused, or contradicted what some thought faith looked like. (Don't drink or vote for a Democrat.)

But, that's where the rub is.

Most internal realities lead to some external practice.
Most beliefs eventually take on some bodily expression.
Most spiritual convictions bear some physical consequence.
Faith looks like something.

Ah! That was the rub for the Pharisees in this morning's text.

Jesus was teaching and healing primarily in the little cluster of villages on the northeast banks of the Sea of Galilee. So, the religious leaders in Jerusalem sent up a fact finding delegation to investigate. What they discovered was troubling. The disciples of Jesus were not following the traditions for purity. Now, obviously the scandal was not about antibacterial cleanliness. The Pharisees' concern was not about dirty hands and greasy pots and pans, but about a way of marking identity.

You know, the Pharisees usually get cast as the villains in the gospels. They are the religious fanatics who major in minutiae with their tunics cinched too tight. But, in all fairness that caricature does them a disservice and it obscures the issues. Most scholars suggest that the Pharisees were a reform movement within first century Judaism. Their goal was to help ordinary people become more observant of the law (both written and oral) as a way of affirming or reinforcing their Jewish identity.

The Jews were a religious minority living in an occupied territory of the Roman Empire; and in this complex cosmopolitan culture one critical problem was how to keep the faith alive and the traditions vibrant. The Pharisees' solution was to insist on rigorous obedience to a variety of laws ~ for example, the washing of hands, feet, and cooking utensils. For most Pharisees these observances did not replace the moral law but they were something akin to "spiritual disciplines."

So, if you got jostled by a Gentile in the marketplace, one way to mark identity and keep boundaries was a good ceremonial washing before you ate. It was a way of remembering who you were.

By the way..... This way of thinking was so common place that even the disciples are stumped by what Jesus says. When they get Jesus alone they ask him what this new parable meant. But, Jesus hadn't told a parable. He didn't offer a metaphor or use a simile. There was no mysterious teaching tool. Jesus spoke clearly and bluntly. And yet, maybe what he said was simply so revolutionary, so radical, that they could only imagine it as a parable.

Big dramatic pause...

Dear friends, maybe the rub under the rub is this:

How do we remember who we are?

How do we mark identity?

How we do keep faith vibrant in a complex cosmopolitan culture?

What does faith look like?

That question was sharpened for me during my recent trip to Israel. At every turn we were confronted with unmistakable religious expression. In 105 degree heat Orthodox Jews wore black shoes, black bowlers, long black pants, long black coats, white long sleeve shirts, and white string fringes around their waists. (When they swam in the Sea of Galilee they took off their coats....) They sported long beards and long curled sideburns, and on the Sabbath they wore fur rimmed hats that looked like lampshades. They wrapped themselves in prayer shawls and rocked in rhythmic recitation of prayers. They

defined themselves over against the Muslims in head scarves and the tourists in Nike t-shirts and Oakley sunglasses clinging to shopping bags.....

And, as the minarets blared calls to prayer the boundaries of faith were clearly delineated by ethnicity, and ritual, and wardrobe.

Now, clearly, I don't know their hearts, but I do know that when the focus of your faith is in ritual, your concern is easily the rules.

And, when your faith is in scripture, your concern is preserving its inerrancy.

And, when your faith is in the historical accuracy of events, your concern is the construction of proofs.

And, when the focus of your faith is a personal encounter with God, your concern is easily subjective experience.

And, when your faith is hemmed in by rational skepticism, your concern is always the questions...

But, for everyone, faith is a mixed bag of tradition, and ritual, and scripture, and personal experience, and culture, and identity, and longing.

No one is pure.

No faith functions without some religious apparatus.

So....

How do we remember who we are?

How do we mark identity?

How do we keep faith vibrant in a complex cosmopolitan culture?

What does faith look like?

Try this on for size.

Jesus says to the Pharisees that in keeping tradition they have thrown out the dishes with the dishwater (?). In rigorous attention to the form they have lost the heart. Jesus says it is about the heart.

And so what if... in this diverse disorientating world one part of faith is the life long experience of re-orientating our hearts toward God, toward Jesus?

What if all of this:

all of this religious apparatus,

all of this tradition,

all of this culture,

all of this scripture,

all of these sacraments,

all of this preaching,

is part of how we keep re-orientating our hearts toward God, toward Jesus.

In all of this we open our hearts to be changed, healed, forgiven, cleansed, and re-directed. And, there is a physical tactile quality to that experience.

There is cold water,
and a baby's smooth skin,
and bread and wine,
and the sinner sitting next to you,
and the nasaly nervous voice of the preacher,

There are external realities, but it is about being changed from the inside out.

It is about re-orientating our lives toward God, toward Jesus.

For, dear friends, what God finally wants from us is our hearts ~ that core sense of self. What God wants is our hearts ~ in whatever shape they are in ~ for him to do what he does best:

Renew.
Recreate.
Redeem.
Salvage.
Save.
And turn us toward the world.

Purity of heart is not the result of ritual. We can't scrub our hearts clean by washing our hands. Our hearts ~ in whatever shape they are ~ can only be changed by God.

But, part of what we do,
part of what faith looks like,
part of the discipline of Christian devotion is trying to offer our hearts, open and malleable before God, for God to do what God will do.

I don't know how it always works. I don't know if the patterns we follow become as quaint and tradition bound as the Pharisee's rules for washing after being in the marketplace. I don't know if all this stuff gets in the way of God engaging the heart. I don't know if religion gets in the way of faith. But, I know that the intention of all it is to re-orientate our hearts before God.

That is our prayer this morning.

May our hearts be opened, our hearts be changed, and our hearts be freed to engage the world without worry of what will stain or soil.

May we be changed from the inside out.

Amen.