

February 16, 2020

## Mark 7:1-23

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

*The Book of Mark* is most likely the first of the four gospel books to be written, sometime in the late 60s CE. In this season of Epiphany (from Christmas to Lent) we read through the first half of the gospel which focuses around the question of the identity of Jesus. Starting in Chapter 8 the story moves to one of conflict between Jesus and the forces aligned against him.

THE PHARISEES AND SOME OF THE SCRIBES – we already know from Mark 3:6 that the religious leaders, even though they didn't agree with each other on many issues, are conspiring together against Jesus and his influence. "The Pharisees went out and immediately [after Jesus healed the man with the shriveled hand on the Sabbath] conspired with the Herodians against [Jesus], how to destroy [Jesus]."

In the 1<sup>st</sup> century, SCRIBES and PHARISEES were two largely distinct groups, though presumably some scribes were Pharisees. SCRIBES had knowledge of the [written] law (or Torah) and could draft legal documents (contracts for marriage, divorce, loans, inheritance, mortgages, the sale of land, and the like). Every village had at least one scribe. PHARISEES were members of a party that believed in resurrection and in following legal traditions that were ascribed not to the Bible but to "the traditions of the fathers" (what we also call the Oral Tradition). Like the scribes, they were also well-known legal experts: hence the partial overlap of membership of the two groups. It appears from subsequent rabbinic traditions, however, that most Pharisees were small landowners and traders, not professional scribes.

**DEFILED** the word means "unclean" or "common" as in "polluted" or "profane" opposed to *holy* & dedicated to God and God's purposes. It's believed that handwashing was widespread as a ritual practice and was probably a "boundary marker" by which Jews both identified themselves and were identified by outsiders as being set apart from their neighbors. Remember that the word "holy" means "set apart" – so it's cheapening, a lessening – a defiling – of what God intended.

**to the tradition of the elders** this is the 'oral tradition' – the traditions of the Fathers" – "ritual regulations that had been passed down to the people by former generations but not recorded in the Law of Moses (what we call the Torah or First Testament). We know from Josephus (a Jewish historian of the 1<sup>st</sup> century) that these regulations were rejected by the Sadducees who observed only regulations written in Scripture."

<sup>1</sup> Now when THE PHARISEES AND SOME OF THE SCRIBES who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, <sup>2</sup> they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with **DEFILED** hands, that is, without washing them. <sup>3</sup> (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; <sup>4</sup> and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) <sup>5</sup> So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the **tradition of the elders**, but eat with **DEFILED** hands?" <sup>6</sup> He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me;

<sup>7</sup> in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.'

<sup>8</sup> You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

<sup>9</sup> Then he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep **your tradition!** <sup>10</sup> For Moses said, '**Honor** your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.' <sup>11</sup> But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, 'Whatever support you might have had from me is **Corban**' (that is, an offering to Go)— <sup>12</sup> then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, <sup>13</sup> thus making void the word of God through **your tradition that you have handed on**. And you do many things like this."

<sup>14</sup> Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and

understand: <sup>15</sup> there is nothing outside a person that by going in can **DEFILE**, but the things that come out are what **DEFILE**.”

<sup>17</sup> When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. <sup>18</sup> He said to them, “Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot **DEFILE**, <sup>19</sup> since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” (*Thus he declared all foods clean.*) <sup>20</sup> And he said, “It is what comes out of a person that **DEFILES**. <sup>21</sup> For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, <sup>22</sup> adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. <sup>23</sup> All these evil things come from within, and they **DEFILE** a person.”

#### QUESTIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF EXAMEN & CONTEMPLATION

- **What part of today’s story grabs you?**
- **The story is all about hand-washing and ritual purity. How do you understand that in our world and life today?**
- **What invitation to moral courage and spiritual living do you hear in this text?**
- **How might we understand our own potential hypocrisy in 2020 in the light of the thoughts of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (*below*)?**

“In the market one might inadvertently come into physical contact with unclean persons or foods, making the human swarm of the marketplace into a newest of ritual contagion.” Hence why hands, cups, pots and kettles – used for measuring etc. in the marketplace, would be ritually washing before use. (Joel Marcus)

**Verses 6-8 is a quote from Isaiah 29:13**

**Verse 10 is quote from the 10 commandments** – Exodus 20:12, Deuteronomy 5:16. “In some Jewish texts on the commandments the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment is interpreted in terms of material support a parent, “**honor**” then means that one must give to him food and drink, clothes and cover him, lead him in and out” – from Philo of Alexandria (a great Rabbi of the 1<sup>st</sup> century).

**Corban** is a Hebrew word for a sacrifice or offering. The word was used to refer to an offering given to God (money, food, resources) with a designation that it couldn’t be used for anything else. So it’s possible that Jesus is saying that hypocrites declare all of their goods and means as “corban” and in that way escape and avoid their duty to “honor” or materially care for their parents. They use God and religion as justification for their un-God-like actions and selfishness.

there is nothing outside a person that by going in can **DEFILE** – “This is the ultimate answer to the questions of the Pharisees and scribes as to why Jesus’ disciples eat with unwashed hands. It seems to be assumed that the Pharisees think that unwashed, ritually impure hands transmit their impurity to the food they touch and that this food, when eaten, in turn transmits its impurity to the eater; Jesus counters by saying that external things like unwashed hands have no power to transmit defilement..” (Joel Marcus)

#### THINKING THEOLOGICALLY

Rev. Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr was a towering presence in American intellectual life from the 1930s through the 1960s. One of the themes upon which he persistently wrote was on foreign policy. He was concerned with the difficulty that Americans have in seeing themselves as they really are. “Perhaps the most significant moral characteristic of a nation,” he declared in 1932, “is its hypocrisy.”

Niebuhr, in looking back to the national myth of the colonists who settled the new world, saw that at the foundation of the purpose of America is “to make a new beginning in a corrupt world.” Those settlers believed “that we had been called out by God to create a new humanity.” They believed further that this covenant with God marked America as a new Israel, as a Chosen People.

Niebuhr had little patience for those who portray the United States as acting on God’s behalf. In that regard, the religiosity that seemingly forms such a core of the American national identity has a problematic dimension. “All men are naturally inclined to obscure the morally ambiguous element in their political cause by investing it with religious sanctity,” observed Niebuhr in an article appearing in the magazine Christianity and Crisis. “This is why religion is more frequently a source of confusion than of light in the political realm.” In the United States “[t]he tendency to equate our political with our Christian convictions causes politics to generate idolatry.”