

Sermon

Proper 17B September 1, 2024

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Well, we made it. We made it through the Bread of Life discourse. We had five weeks of Jesus telling us he was the bread from heaven that would provide eternal life if we would eat his flesh and drink his blood. We had five weeks of trying to get past a literal understanding or interpretation of eating the flesh of Jesus to understand differently. We had five weeks to learn about being nourished by not only the presence of Christ, but by being infused with Christ in such a way that we live as Christ lived. When we do that, we get a glimpse, or taste, of that eternal life in God that Jesus was talking about.

And while we heard this and tried to make sense of what Jesus is saying, and try to live feeding on the Bread of Life, it can still seem like so much metaphysical oddness. Since most of us don't live in the realm of theoretical physics, quantum mechanics, or the sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of John, how can we live out a life that reflects Jesus' call to partake of the Bread of Life?

I've said this before, but this Bread of Life stuff was a forerunner of the "You are what you eat" campaign. In the same way that we need to eat a healthy balance of food, by partaking of the Bread of Heaven, Jesus, we will (hopefully) become more like him, becoming spiritually strong and infused with the presence of Christ in all we do. But John can be a little difficult to follow sometimes, so on this first Sunday after the Bread of Life discourse it is Mark who shows us how to do that.

By eating this Bread of Life, by infusing our bodies with the Body of Christ, and by having that connection with the eternal God, we should reflect more of Christ and God in our lives. This is exactly what today's passage from Mark gets at.

Today we hear of a confrontation between Jesus and a group of Pharisees and scribes over the issue of not washing hands. This wasn't about sanitary practices or singing Happy Birthday while they scrubbed the COVID germs away – this was about the tradition of washing so that unclean or defiled things didn't come into contact with undefiled or holy things, thereby contaminating those undefiled and holy things making them unusable. It's a symbolic ritual and it would be like me saying, "Why don't you bow during the Creed or make the sign of the cross when I give a blessing? Why do you not worship according to the practices of the ancient Church?"

This isn't to say that ancient practices are bad or pointless; a lot of what we do here on Sunday is based on ancient practices, some more important than others. But the point of our worship isn't to carry on those ancient traditions in modern times, the point of our worship is to be transformed by Word and Sacrament. In other words, does what we do here on Sunday have any effect on your life the rest of the week?

There are plenty of people, and churches for that matter, who loudly proclaim how people should live their lives but are then unwilling to live that way themselves. Or they proclaim that those who don't live as they say are doomed to everlasting damnation, or are subjected to abuse and attacks, and are labeled as any number of degrading terms.

This is who Jesus is calling out as hypocrites – those people who demand you act according to their rules but have no awareness or no inclination to behave themselves how they demand others live.

So again, the question is this: Does what you do on Sunday affect the rest of the week? Are you pious on Sunday, but on Monday turn to theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, envy, slander, etc.?

I know that none of us go out and intentionally do these things. Nobody is going to go out this week and rob a bank, kill a neighbor, or the like. But we might refrain from pledging or ignore calls to help because we are more concerned with losing what we have, or we are overly focused on increasing our wealth to the neglect of others. Or we might spend our time focused on what others have that we don't.

Or maybe you don't personally participate in these things, but do you support and follow people who do? Do we support policies that are advantageous to unfettered greed while limiting access to healthcare and food? Do we support policies giving businesses freedom to behave at will while ignoring the effects of hazardous waste and pollution? Do we support people who spend more time tearing down than building up? We may not do these things personally, but supporting them shows where our heart is. It is doing and supporting these evil things that defile us.

So how do we combat these evil, defiling forces? The first way is to take seriously Christ's summary of the law: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind; and love your neighbor as yourself. Two questions to ask ourselves when considering this would be: 1) How does what I do and support show love for God; and, 2) Am I willing to love my neighbor as myself? As our Presiding Bishop is fond of saying, "If it's not about love, it's not about God."

The second way is to reflect back on our Baptismal Covenant – that Covenant which we promised to follow and which we return to at least four times a year. Do you renounce Satan, evil powers, and sinful desires? Will you resist evil? Will you proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ? Will you strive for justice and peace, and respect the dignity of all people? If you ever have doubts about actions or behaviors, pull out the Baptismal Covenant and see how they measure up.

The third way is to repent of participating in those evil and defiling acts, to find a way to make restitution, and to make a new beginning.

We are infused with the Bread of Life. We claim to follow a man who showed the world a different way of being. With everything going on in the world around us, may we remember this and strive for those things which build up rather than tear down, helping to feed those around us with the Bread of Life. It is in doing these things that we will be free from defilement.

Amen.