

## “Lips and Hearts”

Liturgical Date: Proper 16 B

Primary Text: St. Mark 7:1-13

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, is the Holy Gospel from St. Mark 7. What one says may not reflect an inward true love and devotion to God. Thus, the title of the sermon is, “Lips and Hearts.”

I made a reference at the end of the Service last week that I had not intended to preach a series this month, but in preparing the sermons for the last few weeks I have noticed a trend I called “Awkward August”. This is because for several weeks in a row we have some readings that may hit us the wrong way at first. Two weeks ago, we heard “dos and don’ts” which may have seemed a little out of place with our grace and faith emphasis. Then last Sunday we had the feast day for Mary, which could cause a little unease as we don’t want to be confused with the over-emphasis on Mary of the Roman Catholics. Then next Sunday, August concludes with a feast day about John the Baptist getting his head lopped off! But before we get to that, we have our texts for today. The Epistle from Ephesians 5 about the roles of husband and wife can be a little challenging in our modern world. However, this is not even the one we are looking at today.

We read in the Gospel Lesson about one of Jesus’ many interactions with the Pharisees and scribes. They are once again “out to get Jesus” and this time they have traveled about 100 miles from Jerusalem to Galilee. You at least have to give them credit for their determination! But it is not that Jesus and the Pharisees are once again sparring that gets our little Lutheran “antennas” up. It is what they are sparring about. It relates to what Jesus says. For example, our reading concludes with Jesus saying, “*Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition,*

*which ye have delivered; and many such like things do ye.*” Furthermore, Jesus had some other negative things to say about tradition through the text likening these tradition-loving Pharisees to the disobedient in the Old Testament. They are honoring God with their lips, but not their hearts.

A couple of groups of people probably really like this text. One would be children. If your kids are like mine, when they are younger they don't want to wash their hands before coming to the dinner table. We have to tell them they need to do it-seemingly every day. We want their hands to be clean and free of germs before they start touching food and putting those hands near or in their mouth. If any of the kids were listening carefully to our text, they could use it against you the next time you tell them to wash their hands! We heard it, right? The Pharisees are aghast that Jesus' disciples haven't washed their hands before they eat. And Jesus didn't respond by telling the Disciples, “Really guys, how did your mothers raise you? Why didn't you wash your hands?” No, Jesus admonishes the Pharisees for trying to hold to the tradition of hand washing!

The other group of people that really like this text are those that think the traditions of the church are outdated and need to be changed. Many a preacher has used this text (including some Lutheran ones who think we should look more like the megachurches down the road) to advocate for change in the congregation. This is how it goes: We don't really need to do this anymore because Jesus said traditions and outward forms are just “lip service” and God is concerned with hearts that are right with Him. But to those of us who love and cherish many of the traditions of the church, we could be tempted to just read over this text real quick and move on. Most Lutherans are a pretty traditional bunch. We have a certain way of doing things and we have been doing it that way for a long time. Why change? I mean, we began using Setting 3 again today. The roots of it go back well into the previous centuries and it uses some more archaic wording. But many

of us like it. We fondly remember it and like to keep using it. Many of you may be thinking page “5” or “15” right now (from The Lutheran Hymnal). It makes us feel a little nervous and awkward that Jesus is speaking so strongly against tradition here, because we are people that like traditions.

So what gives? I brought in the part about how kids could use this text to argue that Jesus is telling us not to wash our hands before dinner for a reason. That sounded kind of ridiculous, didn't it? I mean if it is sinful for Christians to wash their hands prior to eating, then why have we been and continue to do it today? Obviously, Jesus is not teaching here that washing your hands before meals is wrong. So, this would also mean that He is not teaching that all traditions are wrong either. I have never heard one of those sermons about how we should get rid of all traditions in the Church because “Jesus says to” also include a teaching on how the congregation should also ban handwashing before meals. But to be consistent, such a sermon should if you are interpreting it that way.

What this tells us is that Jesus must mean something else than advocating for a ban on all pre-meal handwashing and traditions. Jesus does react very strongly to the Pharisees when they think the disciples should have washed their hands. Our Lord does deliver a blast against their traditions. Why? We, as always, look to the Biblical text. Were the Pharisees finding fault about the lack of hand washing for sanitary reasons? Were they afraid that these disciples were going to make themselves sick by eating with unwashed hands? No. This was not an issue of sanitation to them, but of ritual observance. The Pharisees and scribes (which also could be translated as “lawyers”) were sticklers for detail. They were legalists who believed that many rules, even more than were in the Bible, must be followed.

The key here is what Jesus says in verses 6-7 when He quotes from Isaiah Chapter 29:13, which was part of our Old Testament Lesson for today. *“Well, hath Isaiah prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoreth me*

*with their lips, but their heart is far from me. Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines and commandments of men.*” Jesus is identifying the problem. The religious leaders were very knowledgeable about the Law. They loved to talk about it. They loved to tell people how good they were at following it. And, truth be told, outwardly they seemed to do a pretty good job at following all the “rules.” But this is not the most important thing. One could be a good rule follower, but for the wrong reasons. You could go into a church and their liturgy is great: it flows seamlessly, the pastor or priest chants majestically, the congregation is crisp in their standing, kneeling, sitting, and always sings on key. But if it is not done from the heart, then it is not right worship. In Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, and Amos we hear the Lord tell Israel to just stop the sacrifices because they don’t really mean it. The outward form looked good, but the heart was empty.

A key part of what Jesus is teaching here is that what Christians do must not only be from the lips and outward form, but from the heart. Furthermore, many of these traditions that the Pharisees were demanding people follow were not even in the Word of God. Notice that they are called, “the tradition of the elders” in verse 3 and by the Pharisees and scribes themselves in verse 5. Jesus calls them the traditions of men and in verse 9, “your own tradition.” These traditions and regulations were formulated by earlier rabbis and had become codified, as if the Jews need more laws! We cannot elevate the traditions of men over the Words of Scripture. Even if a tradition has value and meaning, we cannot demand that all Christians everywhere practice it if it is not clearly taught in the Bible.

Again, Jesus is not demanding that Christians abandon all traditions. He is not saying that tradition has no value. What He is saying is that some traditions do need to go because they are not in line with Scripture and even those traditions that are good and useful must be done with a right heart. All traditions are not created equal. Let me tell you a little story that one of my seminary professors shared with

the class. A daughter was helping her mother prepare a roast in the kitchen one day. As she always did, her mother cut some meat off both ends of the roast and disposed of those pieces before putting the roast in the pan. The daughter asked her mother, “Why do you always do that. It seems like a waste of good meat.” Her mother replied, “I really don’t know. That is just what my mother did.” So they decided to ask the mother, the daughter’s grandmother. Her response was the same, “I don’t know. That is just what my mother did.” So now they track down great grandma and ask her the same question. She knew the answer. “Ahh, when we come to America from the Old Country, we were very poor. My mother only had one pan and it was not big enough to hold a whole roast. So she had to cut off the ends to fit it in and cook the rest.”

So here is an example of a tradition that was being practiced without any knowledge of why. It was actually counter-productive because the cut-off meat could now be used. This also reminded me of the musical “Fiddler On The Roof”. Many of you have probably seen it. It deals much with tradition in a small town of Russian Jews. During the dialogue-musical part called “Tradition”, the main character Tevye proudly relates all the traditions his people follow. And he says this, “How did all these traditions get started? I will tell you. I don’t know.” We don’t want to be like Tevye here. We want to know why we practice the traditions that we do so that we can do them with heart, not just lips. And as I said previously, all traditions are not equal. Changing to a different brand of coffee in a local church is not the same as replacing communion wafers with donuts. We won’t go through all of them today, but most of the things that are regular parts of our liturgical worship either have Scriptural basis or point us to a truth of Scripture. It is not only interesting to know the origins, but also very helpful in having the right heart.

The traditions that the Pharisees and scribes were demanding here were not done with right heart, they were often not drawn from Scripture but rather traditions of man. They were legalistic. And here's the thing about legalism-you find in all religions where people get very caught up in "rules". Legalism can easily serve our own sinful nature, because I like to tell people, "legalism always has loopholes." For example, we think of a group like the Amish as good rule followers. I mean they don't even drive cars! But did you know many Amish do ride in cars? They will hire drivers to take them places. Essentially, they are benefitting from modern technology, the result is the same in that they are in a car and getting from point A to B quickly. But at the same time still staying within their "rule" of not actually driving.

Jesus closes our assigned text with a great example that shows the hypocrisy of these "great with the lips, but no so much with the hearts" Pharisees. Corban. You may have heard that in verse 11 and wondered "what in the world is that?" I am going to tell you! Corban is where you dedicated something to God, generally of material value. It could be money, property, other goods. This was above and beyond the required tithe. And if something was declared "Corban" then it could not be used for secular purposes. Sound real pious right? Here's the rub. There was no timetable as to when you had to actually give away what you had declared "dedicated to God". In theory, you could hold it for yourself, benefitting from it, until you died. Some of these religious leaders had quite a bit, but they could say, "yes, but I have dedicated so much of what I have to God." If someone needed help, they could basically say, "I would love to help you, but I have dedicated what extra I have to God." Jesus gives a specific example here in verses 10-13 related to the Fourth Commandment, "Honor thy father and mother." Apparently, some of these religious leaders had parents (likely elderly) that needed help, but they would not share their resources because it was "Corban." How convenient all of this was.

You get to pay lip service to God and look pious in front of everyone else by dedicating so many of your material possessions to God, while getting to keep it all the while you totally swing and miss at the whole meaning of the Fourth Commandment-not to mention loving your neighbor as yourself! And these people are the ones with gall to chide and say, “but your disciples don’t wash their hands, you know it is tradition!”

Finally, you almost certainly noticed that there is much about washing in this text. We have discussed the hand washing aspect in some detail. It also talks about how they would ritually wash all types of objects. We have also established that the primary focus of this washing is not for sanitary reasons, but religious. What needs to be washed? Our hearts. We must be purged from sin. This must take place so we not only honor God with our lips. We desire to honor God with our hearts, hearts that are not far from Him, but close. Baptism is not a simple outward washing, but an inward. Water is applied outwardly and human lips speak Words. But this is God speaking and acting. His Word, His work. The blood of Jesus, just as we have sung of today, washes us clean-whiter than snow. Yes, we should wash our hands before we eat-but only God can clean us inwardly. Yes, traditions can continue-but only those that are God honoring and point us to Him. Jesus does not declare anything “Corban” as to withhold it from us. He freely gives. He freely washes. He freely creates new hearts. Then our lips may speak, sing, and proclaim rightly from the heart that has been regenerated by the Lord.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.