

No Turning Back--Living the surrendered life Lesson 7

Song-- Take time to be holy
Read Mark 7:1-13

I've been wondering... how much value is there in how much we have in common with one another?

One individual I can think of who had little in common with at least the white people in her community in Montgomery Alabama in 1955 was Rosa Parks. It was almost 50 years ago that Mrs. Park's act of defiance helped touch off the civil rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's. As you know, Mrs. Park's died October 24 at her home in Detroit at the age of 92.

Mrs. Park's sat on the fifth row of a bus and chose to remain in her seat, even when the bus driver demanded she give up her seat for a white male who had just boarded the bus. Mrs. Park's act of defiance lead to her arrested and was convicted of violating the segregation laws and then fined \$10, plus \$4 in court fees. In response, blacks in Montgomery boycotted the buses for nearly 13 months while mounting a successful Supreme Court challenge to the Jim Crow law that enforced their second-class status on the public bus system.

The truth she later explained, was that she was tired of being humiliated, of having to adapt to the byzantine rules, some codified as law and others passed on as tradition, that reinforced the position of blacks as something less than full human beings. ... in other word's "She was fed up!" (<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/25/national/25parks.html?ex=1145851200&en=4b6bd4603f35dfef&ei=5087&examp=GGGNrosaparks>)

So much of relating with other people has a lot to do with what we have in common with one another. Dating services, churches and many other organizations make a point out of highlighting what we have in common. There's nothing worse in our culture than to be stuck with someone whom we have nothing in common.

Mark 7 highlights for us how the Pharisees tear into Jesus as they say "Why do your disciples forget that they have nothing in common with Gentiles? Why do they eat with unclean hands? Why do they act like those common people?"

It was customary for Jews, at least high ranking religious Jews to ceremonially wash their hands before meals. These rituals certainly signified different things, but one thing for sure was to demonstrate that Jews were different.

It signified that Jews were set apart. In the Hebrew language, that's what holiness is really all about. It's about being set apart from the unclean and from the common. Yet so much of Jesus' ministry focused on the common or the unclean in our world.

The issue for these religious leaders is: why does Jesus and his disciples eat with vulgar people. The Pharisees see Jesus and his disciples as not being holy. And these Pharisees are really reminding Jesus that he and his disciples are not to have anything in common with those Gentiles or anything or anyone unclean.

After all, those who really walk with God know to associate with the right people-- right?? Those who really walk with God have nothing in common with unclean people.

In the world I live in-- there's a lot of unclean people.

I remember doing some prison ministry at the New Hampshire State Prison. I studied and prayed and sang and ministered to all kinds of people. People like murderers, homosexuals, child molesters, thieves, drug addicts, and those infected with aids because of their lifestyles. **What do Christians have in common with these folks?**

I think we'll never understand the conflict between Jesus and these religious leaders until we grasp that the debate was not a religious game of Trivial Pursuit.

Jesus was a Jew who defied his own tradition. (and there was nothing trivial about this)

Certainly his parents taught him that these religious traditions mattered. Traditions are vital to the identity of a people or a person. Tradition gave Jews identity and stability... especially as they faced centuries of exile and persecution. Traditions for the Jews, has helped them to maintain stability and identity.

Personally, I like tradition. I like for many things to stay the same. I like how Helen and I do dinner... (I cook and she washes!!) with our little tables in the living room.

I like the way we do Thanksgiving and Christmas in our family.

I like having the same seat at church and relating with the same people at church.

I like that I can be with a church where most if not all of the people believe just like me.

I like singing many of the same songs that speak to my soul.

I would like that people, and places and family traditions remain unchanged all of my days.

But... you need to know that I know better!

I so appreciate what Kathleen Norris says in her book "**Dakota**" as she praises the traditions of the prairie. Here's a woman who leaves her crazy life in Manhattan in order to lead a far more peaceful life on the plains. Here's what she says:

"The land does not change, or does so only slowly; maybe Dakotans emulate the land in that respect. The danger is that in so doing they can lose an important aspect of their humanity. In forsaking the ability to change, they diminish their capacity for hope. We don't need change. What we need, as my friend suggested is to turn back the clock to the way things were twenty years ago, when the town was booming and the world made sense. There was nothing that couldn't be judged by the values we all shared. But she may find, as Gatsby did, that disconnecting from change does not recapture the past. It loses the future."

My prayer is that God will help us whenever we disconnect ourselves from change.

My prayer is that whenever we shy away from change because that's not how we did it years ago in the church... that we'll repent.

My prayer is that we will not spend our time and energy on deciding who's in and who's out of the church, or who's clean or unclean. **To do so is to lose sight of God's future for the church.**

As Jesus debates with these religious leaders, he doesn't just throw away his tradition or forget the richness of his heritage, nor is he even trying to change things just to shake up the current leadership.

Mark 7 really is showing Jesus challenging the value of the religious traditions that has lost its purpose.

Maybe Jesus let this debate go on because he knows the human condition.

He knows us.

He knows that we need to be reminded daily that the Gospel is given to us to build one another up, to draw one another closer to God, not to restrict or destroy.

He knows that we can be tempted to try and get our religion right and forget people in the process.

He knows that we can get so caught up with the outside and external that we forget that true life begins with the inside and the heart.

Yes, we are to be holy!

Yes, we are to be clean!

But that begins on the inside, not on the outside!

The purpose for the hand washing was not matters of hygiene and dirt removal. Nor was it a matter of being ceremonially pure (meaning clean verses being unclean). The tradition and purpose of hand washing can be traced back to Solomon where it is said that the hands are to be washed in connection to prayer and thanksgiving (which of course involves food).

Hand washing was not a matter of ones righteousness or holiness in order to identify those who are in and those who are out.

Jesus feeds thousands of people in Mark 6:30-44 with almost nothing. Instead of celebrating God's wonderful generosity, the Pharisees can't even see past their own traditions and struggle with the disciples not washing their hands-- instead of seeing God's works. So they do what anyone who is lead by tradition does... they write off the disciples and Jesus.

Mark shows us that Jesus has very little tolerance for those who would say, "**we have nothing in common with those people. For they are common (unclean) and we are not. For we are holy and they are not. For we are in and they are out!**"

Luke also writes about this same problem. Peter who from his youth understood the food laws (what to eat and not eat), finds himself in a dream where God instructs him to eat from a banquet of forbidden (unclean) foods **Acts 10:9-16**. Peter of course objects reminding God that he has never eaten anything unclean. But then he hears God's voice, "**don't call what I make clean, unclean or common.**" **Acts 10:15**

I've been working on my Master's degree in Church Growth and have learned a few things about church dynamics. I researched churches that are exploding with growth and filled with vitality. Sadly, my research has indicated that there are far too many churches that resemble museums and family chapels.

Many times, churches in America that are struggling to survive tend to be frozen in traditions and old thoughts and beliefs.

Interestingly enough, something that my research has shown is that most churches want to grow; while at the same time they communicate that they do not want anything to change. Churches like this tend to claim that they are open to all people but communicate that those with differing opinions or theologies should go and worship with those that are more like them.

Funny (ironic) thing though, **in Christ** you and I are one kind.

In Christ we are made holy so that we can share everything in common, because **in Christ** nothing is unclean, because **Christ** has made us clean.

In Christ, you and I are made holy through the love God has for us.

It's just like Jesus to challenge us in this way and then he turns around and lives a real life story for us to learn from.

Read Mark 7:24-30

Jesus finds himself and his disciples venturing off into "common" country-- into Gentile country-- no doubt a place where no self-respecting believer would ever go (on purpose that is).

Then the Gentile woman comes up to Jesus and asks him a favor. Jesus gives a right and traditional answer-- "I was sent to the Jews... not the common people."

NLT- "First I should help my own family, the Jews. It isn't right to take food from the children and throw it to the dogs."

But notice that this woman doesn't settle for this answer. So the Syrophenician woman responds in faith knowing that Jesus will hear her and respond favorably to her. Jesus is impressed with such faith from one of **those people**.

Take time to be Holy is a good song, but it's a dangerous thing to live out in Mark's gospel.

To be holy means we have to reevaluate what is important.

To be Holy, in the way Christ calls us **to be holy will** open up the church.

It will open us up to those people.

The point is **it will open us up** to those people we live near, and deal with and see everywhere we go.

It will open us up to the reality that you and I have everything in common--everything that finally matters... that is.

Listen to Anne Lamott's words about her interactions with a church from her book-- "Operating Instructions"

"When Sam was 6 days old, I took him to my little church in Marin City, the church where I've been hanging out for four years now.... I got in the habit of stopping by the church on Sundays but staying in the back, in this tense, lurky way, and leaving before the service was over because I didn't want

people to touch me, or hug me, or try to make me feel better about myself. After I got sober and started to feel okay about myself, I could stay to the end and get hugged.... Anyway, the first Sunday after Sam's birth, I kind of limped in ... and everyone was staring joyfully and almost brokenheartedly at us because they loved us so much. I walked, like a ship about to go down, to a seat in the back. But the pastor said, Whoa, whoa, not so fast--you come up here and introduce him to his new family. So I limped up to the little communion table in the front of the half circle of folding chairs where we sit, and I turned to face everyone. The pain and joy were just overwhelming. I tried to stammer, "this is my son," but my lip was trembling, my whole face was trembling, and everyone was crying. When I'd first started coming to the church, I couldn't even stand up for half the songs because I'd be so sick from cocaine and alcohol that my head would be spinning, but these people were so confused that they'd thought I was a child of God. Now they've seen me sober for three years, and they saw me through my pregnancy.... Toward the end of my pregnancy, people were stuffing money into my pockets, even though a lot of them live on welfare and tiny pensions. They'd sidle up to me, slip a twenty into the pocket of my sweater, and dart away."

This is what Jesus means when he calls us to take time to be holy. Taking the time to be holy is taking time to show people that in God's eyes they are important and always welcome. I can see Jesus smiling when looking at the church that Anne Lamott attended and how that church didn't worry about how it might look if they welcomed a common person... one of those people. What a difference it made that one church took time to be holy.

The Latin phrase *Coram Deo* became a motto for many in the medieval church. Simply put it means: *Before God* (as in living your life before God). Live your life before God... in a way that expresses the Gospel is for all. This includes Pharisees and racist bus drivers. As we live *Coram Deo*, only then can we be clean.

Scot Poirier

Minister

Chelmsford Church of Christ

205 North St.

Chelmsford Ma.

978-256-8901