

New Hope Lutheran Church

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August 29, 2021

14th Sunday after Pentecost

Coming Events

Sept 1

10 – 1 Wed Café **Regent St. (outside only)**
2:00 Finnish Bible Study **Impola room at Finlandia**

Sept 5

10:00 Finn. Worship Service † **Voima Hall**
2:00 Eng. Worship Service † **Regent St.**

In our prayers Ruth, Fred, Esme.

We are tentatively planning a Bilingual Rally Sunday service for Sunday September 12, 10:00 a.m. at Voima Hall so please mark your calendars for this special service.

As we prepare to come together once again, we are reminded that our worship services require worship assistants, beginning in August, and a growing need as restrictions increase. Please consider being a part of this important ministry and let Hilka know of your interest by calling the office at 705-673-2933 or email office@nhlc.ca

Opening Hymn – My God, How Wonderful Thou Art (863)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUOWT1AMyrm>

Prayer of the Day

O God our strength, without you we are weak and wayward creatures. Protect us from all dangers that attack us from the outside, and cleanse us from all evil that arises from within ourselves, that we may be preserved through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Psalms 15

- 1 LORD, who may dwell in your sacred tent? Who may live on your holy mountain?
- 2 The one whose walk is blameless, who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from their heart;
- 3 whose tongue utters no slander, who does no wrong to a neighbor, and casts no slur on others;
- 4 who despises a vile person but honors those who fear the LORD; who keeps an oath even when it hurts, and does not change their mind;
- 5 who lends money to the poor without interest; who does not accept a bribe against the innocent. Whoever does these things will never be shaken.

First Reading “Deuteronomy 4:1 – 2, 6 – 9”

1 Now, Israel, hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. 2 Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you.

6 Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.” 7 What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? 8 And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today? 9 Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them.

Second Reading “James 1:17 – 27”

17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. 18 He chose to give us birth through the

word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created. 19 My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, 20 because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. 21 Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. 22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. 23 Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror 24 and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. 25 But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do. 26 Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. 27 Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Gospel “Mark 7:1 – 8, 14 – 15, 21 – 23”

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of the disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. For the Pharisees and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; 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. 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?” He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’ You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.” Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.” For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

Sermon

By Rev. Dennis Serfas

Assistant to the Bishop, Saskatchewan Synod

Welcome to this summer sermon series that our Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada is providing for congregations throughout the summer months. I am Pastor Dennis Serfas, one of the part-time Assistants to the Bishop, for the Saskatchewan Synod. Supposedly, I am retired and live in Prince Albert. The last 20 years of my career were spent as the Director of Spiritual Care for the Prince Albert Parkland Health Region. Prior to that, I was a parish Pastor for about 16 years, nine of which were spent here in this congregation of Messiah Lutheran, from where I am taping this sermon, and where my wife and I are currently members.

From the onset of today's gospel, it appears that the Pharisees would have been great advocates and supporters of the provincial and national Medical Health Officers, who have been setting guidelines to follow throughout the Pandemic, ensuring proper handwashing. Initially, it might appear that Jesus' defying the rules of the time, were similar to today's protesters in various cities and communities in our own country, regarding the laws that some felt were being imposed upon them since March of last year. Unfortunately, some were unable or unwilling to see past the regulations to the benefits for themselves and those around them. Similarly, in today's text from Mark's gospel, the Pharisees are having difficulty seeing beyond the Jewish ritual of washing hands. It's much more than that! And Jesus response to them certainly makes it much for than that, for them and for us today.

The Pharisees were all about the law; but it often was more about their own laws that they had created or were handed down to them. Today's reading starts by saying "The Pharisees and Scribes come from Jerusalem," the hotbed of both political and religious authority and power. Both do not seem to serve the very people they are supposed to take care of. Jesus sensed the hypocrisy in their question about his disciples eating without washing their hands. His curt response makes it clear that he wants to move on to the real heart of the matter, when he quotes from the prophet Isaiah, saying, "This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."

Some of you might recall the opening words of the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. Tevye, the dairyman who is always

carrying on lengthy conversations with God, says to the audience. "A fiddler on the roof. Sounds crazy, no? It isn't easy. You may ask, why do we stay up here if it's so dangerous? We stay because this is our home. And how do we keep our balance?" He says, "That I can tell you in one word – tradition! Because of our traditions, we've kept our balance for many, many years. You may ask, how did this tradition start? I tell you – I don't know! But it's a tradition.

Tradition can be a good thing. Traditions can enrich life and faith. Traditions can provide structure and discipline. Traditions can be gifts to our communities. According to Wikipedia, a tradition is a belief or behavior passed down within a group or society with symbolic meaning or special significance with origins in the past. Every culture or ethnic group has their special traditions. Every denomination and congregation have their own specific traditions. Some of them are biblical; some of them are not; some of them are Lutheran; some of them are not. Some of them are important to observe; but others are not! Some of them are simply done because, well as Tevye says, "It's tradition.

Today's text from the gospel of Mark is about Tradition. Tradition is one of those words that for some people makes them feel very nostalgic with pleasant feelings from past experiences. Yet for other people, the word makes them very uncomfortable. For many of our Indigenous brothers and sisters, it brings back memories of wounds that have never been allowed to heal, things that were done because they were told it would be good for them, rules that were put into place often in the name of religion and supported by the government and the church. So, obviously, the issue behind this confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees, was not about handwashing. Handwashing before eating, by itself, was and always will be a good practice for anyone. It just makes good sense. However, what does not make good sense, is when the human traditions that we have created, and still create, get in the way of and obscure and replace and misuse the good intentions of God's law.

As I prepared for today, this issue made me look at my own practices and assumptions; it made me ask, and I hope it will make you ask the question, "What things are we doing as the people of God, and as the Christian church in the twenty-first century, that gets in the way of the real message of the gospel;

the message of the gospel that is intended to unite and heal and bring new life.

As I mentioned, the last 20 years of my career I worked as the Director of Spiritual Care in our local Health Region. I remember getting a call one day from the manager of the inpatient Mental Health unit, wanting me to see a patient who had requested a visit. The patient had experienced many kinds of abuse in her life, often not getting the proper supports that she needed. In the course of those events, she had gotten involved with one of our local faith groups, where doing the "right thing" often superseded doing the "compassionate and loving thing", a community where most things were black and white and you did what was expected of you. However, in this woman's life experiences, most things she struggled with were in the grey areas. I remember her saying to me, that some well-intentioned person from her church had questioned why she suffered from mental illness, and had concluded that if her faith had been stronger, and her prayers more sincere, then God would have relieved her of this illness.

Well, professionally I could not say what I really would like to have said! Instead, I spoke about the loving and compassionate God that I knew and prayed to. At the end of the conversation, the woman I was speaking with made the astute observation that her "church friend" was in a leg cast due to a bad break. She wittingly said to me "I guess her faith isn't strong enough either." She quickly realized how dangerous and hurtful it can be to focus on the requirements and misguided beliefs of an institution, rather than on caring for the real needs of people with understanding and compassion. Tradition often is and can be a good thing! However, when it gets in the way and harms and hurts and divides, it is not a good thing, and it is not a Godly thing either! In *Fiddler on the Roof*, tradition causes Tevye, a good man, to turn away his daughter because she married outside the faith.

My intention today is not to throw the Pharisees under the bus. They were a well-respected religious group, who were progressive in many ways. In Mark's story, they are a group that the audience would have trusted. Some scholars suggest that among the various Jewish groups of the time, Jesus' teachings would have been closest to those of the Pharisees. I guess it is kind of like when we get upset and riled up by people who remind us of ourselves. The difference comes though

when the Pharisees, in their attempt to make the “tradition of the elders” more relatable to the people, interpreted the law in order to give precise clear directions to follow. Unfortunately, they often couldn’t and didn’t follow their own directions. It was humanly impossible! Now, back to the question of handwashing.

As much as we may want to empathize with the Pharisees over what are best practices in certain situations, this is clearly not about handwashing. It never was. Instead, the religious authorities are holding the tradition that what is inside needs to be protected from what is outside! Sounds kind of familiar, doesn’t it! Jesus flips that around to say: It is not the outside world we need to protect ourselves from. Anything we could fear is already within ourselves. “There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile,” says Jesus, “but the things that come out are what defile.” In other words, our greatest enemy isn’t out there somewhere. The evil of the world begins from inside us.

It might be tempting to look to far-off times and far-off places where terrible things have happened and still do happen, where people are cruel to each other, and think that we ourselves would never make the same choices. Or maybe, for you, like for many people, the experience of horrific cruelty is not that far off at all.

The depth of the problem that Jesus is trying to point out for us is: That our goodness and our sinfulness, both, go all the way down. We cannot forget either one!

And as Lutheran Christians we have this tension and wrestle with it throughout our lives, or at least we should be wrestling with it! That we are created good, in God’s image, and our darkness’s come from within. That we are beautiful in God’s eyes and we are capable of terrible cruelty. I don’t have the answer. I doubt you do either!

But I do have an image intersecting two separate realities; of life and death, of total power and goodness, and of utter weakness and pain. It is the Cross, standing tall and pointing to God’s mercy. So, as we continue to grapple with these two realities of goodness and sinfulness, we know a day will come when every tear will be wiped away, and we will stand

reconciled and in relationship with all those we have harmed, and all who have harmed us.

Jesus offers us forgiveness that makes us whole even while we are not yet healed.

Tradition comes from the Latin *traditio*, meaning “handing over.” Most of you worshipping in a church building today or listening to this sermon, are doing so because someone cared enough to hand over the faith to us. What will our faith look like in future generations?

The Pandemic with its severity, might be behind us, but both we and the world we live in, will continue to have other challenges that will need to be confronted. And here is something we can learn from the Pharisees after all. Because the tradition of the elders was in essence, a way to remain in relationship with the Holy One, and with each other. Isn’t that what we need to do? We need, more than ever, to stay in relationship as we listen to and get to know each other, so that our neighbors never become invisible to us. We have a long road ahead! But we have each other and we have God walking by our side.

In the name of God who created us good, and redeems us in our failures, and sustains us for the journey. Amen.

Hymn – Lord, Let My Heart Be Good Soil (512)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=scqHLo-t4wM>

Prayers

Rooted in Christ and sustained by the Spirit, we offer our prayers for the church, the world, and all of creation.

You have revealed your love for people overlooked and cast aside, sending your son to be born among the humble and poor. Send your church to proclaim good news to those who feel abandoned, despised, or rejected and make our congregations places of genuine welcome and hospitality. God, in your mercy. **Hear our prayer.**

All creation longs for healing and restoration. Thwart the destruction of plant and animal habitats and amplify the voices of those who advocate for wise stewardship of the earth’s resources. God, in your mercy. **Hear our prayer.**

We remember your promise to our ancestors and look to you for justice. Expose pride, greed, and exploitation wherever it is found and raise up humble leaders who act on behalf of those who are poor, oppressed, or in other need. God, in your mercy. **Hear our prayer.**

Your Spirit lives in our hearts and makes us heirs of salvation. Rescue us from shame and dishonor. Lift up the lowly, fill the hungry with good things, and have mercy on those who turn to you for help. God, in your mercy. **Hear our prayer.**

Forgiving Lord, you tell us over and over again in your word how to be your servants. Help us to achieve that goal so that we can discover the joys of serving you alone. Forgive us when we stray to the point where we serve ourselves and refuse to see the needs of your children. Guide us to always strive for a servant attitude. God, in your mercy. **Hear our prayer.**

We give thanks for the saints who have found refuge in you, O God. As you have delivered them from all their afflictions, so save us from all our earthly troubles until that day when we sing your praise together in heaven. God, in your mercy. **Hear our prayer.**

We lift these and all our prayers to you, O God, confident in the promise of your saving love; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

Hymn – For the Beauty of the Earth (879)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTcJ_SQruhE