

A Different Perspective

Scripture Readings:

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

James 1:17-27

A young woman in college sent this letter home to her parents:

Dear Mom and Dad,

I'm sorry I haven't written in such a long time, but my writing paper was lost when the dormitory burned. I'm out of the hospital now and the doctor says that my vision should return sooner or later. A wonderful boy named Bill rescued me from the fire and was kind enough to let me share his apartment, so I have a place to stay. I know how much you've been looking forward to becoming grandparents, so you'll be happy to know that your first grandchild is due to arrive in August.

Love, Sue

*P.S. I hope you've enjoyed the above exercise in creative writing. None of it is actually true. The dorm didn't burn, I haven't been in the hospital, there's nothing wrong with my eyesight, I'm not living with a boy named Bill (in fact, I don't even have a boyfriend), and I'm not pregnant. However, I **did** get a "D" in English and an "F" in French, and I just wanted you to receive the news in the proper perspective.¹*

Our perspective, our viewpoint, can make a huge difference in how we respond to what's going on in our lives. This morning's Gospel reading invites us to take a look at different perspectives about cleanliness. Jesus was being questioned by the scribes and the Pharisees, the religious leaders who were careful to obey all of the Jewish laws. They asked him, *Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands? Why don't they wash their hands before they eat?*" At first that sounds like a perfectly reasonable concern. We learned it from our mothers. *"Supper's almost ready. Go wash your hands!"* Sounds familiar, doesn't it? Every nurse I've ever known has been a strong advocate of hand-washing. It prevents the spread of germs. *Of course* you ought to wash your hands before you eat! Why wouldn't Jesus agree? Why did Jesus get riled up and call them hypocrites?

It helps to understand exactly what the scribes and Pharisees meant when they talked about hand-washing. This wasn't a simple matter of hygiene. It wasn't a question of ordinary cleanliness. For the religious leaders this was a matter of ceremonial purity. They had thousands of strict rules that governed every possible situation in life, including the proper procedure for washing one's hands. The water for washing was kept in special large stone jars. First, the hands were held with the fingertips pointing upward and water was poured over them. The water had to run down at least to the wrist. Then you had to make a fist and rub it into the palm and against the surface of your other hand. Once this had been done with both hands, your hands were wet but that water was now contaminated because it had touched your unclean hands. So the next step was for you to hold your hands with your fingertips pointing downward and water had to be poured over them beginning at the wrist and running off the ends of your fingers. Only then would your hands be considered appropriately clean. The scribes and Pharisees believed that it was necessary to follow this procedure before every meal *and* between every course in a meal.²

Failure to wash your hands in that precise way was considered much worse than mere bad manners or carelessness. It meant that you were unclean in God's eyes. You were a sinful person. And it didn't end with hand-washing. If you went to the marketplace you were expected to bathe afterward by immersing your entire body in water in order to rid yourself of any possible contamination that might have come from brushing against a Gentile or

¹ William D. Bouton, in a presentation on June 5, 1985.

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, pp. 164-165.

some other unclean person in the crowd. There were elaborate procedures for washing dishes and pots and pans as well. And why were they so obsessed with making sure that everything was totally clean? If it went way beyond what reasonable hygiene required, why did they do it? They did it because they thought it pleased God. They did it to *earn* God's favor. They were sure that if they made themselves pure enough, God would be sure to love them and bless them.

They might be filled with resentment and hostility on the inside. They might be judgmental and self-righteous on the inside. But if they were super clean on the outside, they considered themselves to be good people and entitled to all the rights and benefits of God's chosen ones. It's no wonder that Jesus got upset. It's no wonder that he accused them of being hypocrites! The word *hypocrite* has an interesting history. The Greek word *hupokrites* refers to an actor playing a part on a stage. Over time it came to apply not only to actors but to anyone whose behavior was merely an act with no hint of sincerity behind it.³ Many Jews in Jesus' time were obsessed with outward ceremonial purity but paid little attention to the condition of a person's heart. Jesus had a radically different understanding. For him religion was not a matter of legalistic rituals and ceremonies. It was a matter of loving God and loving other people.

In today's reading from *The Letter of James* there is a short verse that was burned into my brain back when I was in the fifth grade. There was a wooden plaque on the wall of my Sunday School classroom with the words: *Be ye doers of the word and not hearers only*. I learned early on that it was not enough to memorize Bible verses and have perfect attendance at Sunday School. I might be able to come up with the correct answers when the teacher gave us a Bible quiz, but if I didn't have love in my heart I was in trouble. If I didn't treat others with kindness and compassion, I couldn't claim to be a Christian.

I expect some of you remember the musical play *My Fair Lady*. One of my favorite scenes in that play involves an exchange between Eliza Doolittle and Freddie, the young man who is infatuated with her. He goes on and on and on about how much he loves her. He reads poetry, he sings songs. He pulls out every eloquent phrase he knows, but Eliza is unmoved. Finally, in exasperation, she turns to him and says:

Words, words, words, I'm so sick of words...

*Don't talk of stars, burning above.
If you're in love, show me!
Tell me no dreams, filled with desire.
If you're on fire, show me!*

*Sing me no song, read me no rhyme.
Don't waste my time. Show me!
Don't talk of love lasting through time.
Make me no undying vow. Show me now!⁴*

It doesn't take a lot of imagination to picture God singing that same song.

*Sing me no song, read me no rhyme.
Don't waste my time. Show me!
Don't talk of love lasting through time.
Make me no undying vow. Show me now!*

Or maybe God would use the words of that well-known theologian, Elvis Presley, who wanted, "A *little less conversation, a little more action.*"

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 168

⁴ From *My Fair Lady* by Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe.

We pastors spend a lot of time working on the liturgy for Sunday morning services. We like to play with words. We enjoy building a worship experience around a theme. We want everything to be carefully coordinated and choreographed. Maybe God would prefer it if we spent a little less time with words and a little more time with people who are hurting.

Some time ago my husband and I had some friends over for dinner. I wanted to impress them with some real southern fried chicken so I was bustling around in the kitchen until it was time to sit down at the table. During the meal I was too preoccupied with serving and passing dishes to get involved in the conversation. After dinner I was busy clearing the table and putting away leftovers. Before I knew it, it was time for our friends to go home. They left and I realized that I had been so distracted by serving the meal that I really hadn't taken the time to enjoy their visit. I had my priorities mixed up. A simpler, easier meal would have given me time to interact with people I really care about. Maybe some of you have had that problem, too.

Jesus reminds us that the scribes and the Pharisees aren't the only ones who miss out on the most important things. Anything that gets in the way of our relationship with God and our relationship with other people is a problem.

Since you've got a United Methodist preacher this morning, you might expect to hear something about John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. John Wesley's mother, Susannah, was a remarkable woman. She had nineteen children. She obviously had more than her share of household tasks to perform, and yet we are told that she made a practice of regularly spending time alone with each child. Alone in her room she talked to each child individually. She taught them to read, she taught them Bible stories, and she built lines of communication that stayed strong even after her sons and daughters became adults.

This woman, who could have so easily become a martyr to the cooking kettle and the diaper pail, kept her sense of perspective and nourished the spirits of her children as well as their bodies. John Wesley adopted his mother's old motto as a pattern for his own life:

Whatever obscures your own sense of God, whatever impairs the tenderness of your own conscience, and whatever destroys your own relish for spiritual things, that is sin to you, however innocent it may be in itself.⁵

We need to keep a sense of perspective, a sensitivity to the things that are truly important. We need to remember that being faithful is not about outward appearances but about the condition of our hearts. And we need to be doers of the word and not hearers only. May God grant us the gift of grace that is so much more than anything that we could possibly earn on our own.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
August 30, 2015
Sarah S. Miller

⁵ *Heirlooms*, edited by Margaret T. Applegarth, p. 53.