

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

1 The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and 2 saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were "unclean," that is, unwashed. 3 (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. 4 When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.) 5 So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?" 6 He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: " 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. 7 They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.' 8 You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."

14 Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. 15 Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.' "

21 For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, 22 greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. 23 All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.' "

A young rabbi went to serve his first synagogue, and he noticed that on the first Sabbath, when he said the prayers, the congregation on the left side of the synagogue stood at the beginning of the prayers, and the congregation on the right side remained seated. The young rabbi thought this was a little odd, but continued to say the prayers. After the first couple of petitions, he noticed a murmuring, which intensified as he continued the prayers. Finally, it got loud enough that he was able to make out some of the words. The murmuring in the congregation was a disagreement between the two halves of the congregation; the left half was saying that in this synagogue the tradition was that the congregation stood during the prayers, and the right half was saying that in this congregation the tradition was that they sat during the prayers. As the prayers continued, the voices got louder, until finally the rabbi stopped because he was sure that God was the only one who could hear him anymore. Hoping that this event was due to having a new rabbi (and attempting to influence him), the young rabbi did not discuss it with anyone, but the next Sabbath, it happened again. The argument once again got so loud that the young rabbi stopped before he had finished his prayers - people were actually yelling at each other. The tone had gotten rancorous, and each side of the congregation started to engage in accusations of heresy and other name-calling. The young rabbi looked up the elderly rabbi who had served this congregation for years, and told him what was going on. The question he asked at the end of his story was, "So is it the tradition of the congregation to stand during the prayers?" The older rabbi stroked his beard and replied, "No, that has never been the tradition of that congregation." "So the tradition is that they remain sitting during the prayers?" The older rabbi looked off into the distance, as if remembering the good years serving God as a rabbi and said, "No, that was never the tradition of that congregation either." The young rabbi threw his hands in the air in exasperation, and said, "There must be some solution to this! The way things are now, they just end up screaming at each other during the prayers." The old rabbi's face lit up in a smile as he lifted an admonishing finger to the sky and said, "Yes, That's it, that was our tradition!"

Traditions...Last week we talked about stumbling blocks to Christianity. One I did not mention was tradition. Maybe I should have in light of today's scripture. How often do we let tradition get in the way of our worship?

I am always amazed when I talk with other ministers that their churches seem to have some of the same problems with traditions. Here are a few stories of tradition: a church almost came to blows when the property committee wanted to change the sanctuary carpet from red to blue. The uproar was horrible. As it turned out, in that church, it was not possible to worship God from a blue carpet; It had to be red. In another church, the worship committee wanted to do away with the 1974 hymnals and purchase some brand new 2004 hymnals. A fight erupted that almost split the church. A compromise was finally reached; put the new 2004 hymnals in the chapel, and leave the 1974 hymnals in the sanctuary. Another church had such a rift over a tradition, it actually split the church and a separate church was started. The tradition; is communion served before or after the sermon. In the three examples I just gave, did any of the traditions make any real difference in worshipping God. No, not really. As we sit here this morning, we probably think that each of these actual examples were probably a bit silly. In today's gospel reading we find that the Pharisees and scribes were upset with some of Jesus' disciples because they were not properly observing the traditions of the elders at mealtime. The Pharisees had noticed that the disciples were not performing the ceremonial washings of their hands before they ate. Before the Jews would eat, they poured water over their hands with the fingers pointed upward. This water was kept in special jars and guarded to be free from any impurities. After pouring the water over their hands with the fingers pointed up, they again poured water again over their hands at the wrists; this time holding their fingers downward. It was thought that in this fashion, they would purify their hands from any ceremonial uncleanness. Now this action had nothing to do with hygiene. It was merely a ceremonial washing, and it had become a very important tradition. But now maybe we can understand why Jesus said what he did in verses six thru eight;

lets listen: **He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions."** Originally this washing was to be done by priest only as they were going from the marketplace to the temple to purify their hands in case they had touched someone or something ceremonially unclean. The Pharisees had rewritten some of the laws God had passed down to Moses. All total, they had come up with 613 laws that all Jews were required to keep. In reality, most of these laws were mere traditions that had absolutely nothing to do with worshipping God.

For a lot of reasons, we're lucky to live in eastern North Carolina, and in particular in Pitt County. Here's one reason. Let's see; leave our parking lot, turn right on to Greenville Boulevard. Go four stop lights and turn right on to Arlington Boulevard. Go two stop lights to Hooker Road and turn right again. Go to the fifth stop light, turn left. Where are you? Vidant Medical Complex, and in particular, the Heart Institute. If you have a medical problem with your heart, I can't think of a better place to be to get your heart repaired. We have some really great cardiologist in Pitt County. Don't get me wrong, I'm not a public spokesperson for Vidant. But, I can't think of any other heart institutes here in Pitt County, or, can I? How about the one we're in right now? I think HMCC is a pretty good heart institute. We may not be the premier medical institute, but we are a premier spiritual heart institute. And I dare say, there is a greater need for spiritual heart institutes than medical ones. Jesus let the Pharisees know real quick that it's what's in the heart that really matters, not traditions. Verses 14-15 and 21-23: **Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them. "For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person."**

I read somewhere that you cannot commit any act, whether good or bad if it is not in your heart first. Think about it. You cannot show a person kindness if it has not entered your heart to first be kind. You cannot physically commit adultery if it has not been in your heart to do so first. You cannot cheat someone if it is not in your heart to do so. You cannot show someone love if love is not in your heart first. Do you see where I'm coming from? Whatever you do has to be in your heart first. What condition is your heart in?

Wednesday afternoon, I watched the video of the sermon a pastor friend of mine delivered last Sunday. He was using a totally different text and had a totally different point to his sermon than the one I'm trying to make this morning. During his sermon he asked this question: When you wake up in the morning, before you brush your teeth, or comb your hair, before you do anything, do you ask the question, **God, what can I do for you today?** When I heard him ask that question, I was dumbfounded! Wow, I don't think I've ever asked God that question first thing in the morning. It isn't the second thing I think about, or the third or even the fourth. I'm not sure I even ask God that question before noon each day. As I watched the video, he went on to make the point that if in the quietness of the morning, you ask that question first, and then listen to God's answer, and act on God's answer, then your heart will be in the right place, your heart will be in the right condition.

That works not only from a personal standpoint, but also from a church-wide standpoint. As a church, what condition is our heart in? Is it where it needs to be? We keep asking the question, how can we get more people to come to Hooker Memorial. I think a better question is, as a church, is our heart in the right place? As a church are we doing the things that Christ called us as a church to do? As a church are we asking, God what can we do for you today? As a minister, as elders, as deacons, as a congregation, are we asking God, what can we do for you today? Or are we saying, God, here's what we are going to do, hope you like it.

God is more concerned with who we are on the inside, with the condition of our heart, than the outward traditions we observe. You can pray standing up or you can pray sitting down and still never really pray. You can wash your hands a thousand times and still have sin in your heart. You can sing every song in the 1974, or the 2004, or the 2012 hymnal and still not know God. You can worship on red carpet all your life and never really experience holy ground. You can take bread and the cup before the sermon every time or after the sermon every time and still never commune with God. It's not the outward form of the tradition that matters; it's what lies in our hearts that counts. We all work here at Hooker Memorial Heart Institute. Are we good cardiologists, or are we guilty of malpractice? God, what can we do for you today?