

THE
FOURTEENTH
SUNDAY
AFTER
PENTECOST

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Mark 7:1-23 Proper 17 B 2012
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Holy Holes

This morning we are confronted with one of those hot button issues that constantly get religious institutions tangled up and confused. What do we do when the practices, identities and ritual of our religious institution become an end to themselves?

And more importantly perhaps, how do we respond when we learn that perhaps God is ready to call us into something new--when we learn that we need to change and be transformed.

How do we grapple with the fact that we need to learn to let go of ways of being that we feel shape our very identity? How do we encounter the proposition that the things which we hold tightly no longer serve God's purposes?

So today the Pharisees and the scribes, those who represent the religious establishment, confront Jesus and they want to know why Jesus' disciples do not follow the tradition of the elders.

Now I know we always like to pick on the Pharisee's but we do so at great risk---if we fail to see ourselves in their behavior we trivialize Jesus' whole teaching around very important questions.

The elders and the later Pharisees who followed them *were* devout men. Starting with the best of intentions, they attempted to apply the Law of Moses to every aspect of life, and most of all, they were scrupulous about honoring the food, which they received from God. The trouble, however, is that eventually the strict practices they developed became an end in themselves.

But Jesus is leading people into a new way of having a relationship with God, instead of subscribing to this current system of unbendable rules and practices, Jesus is teaching unflinching examination of the status quo.

Jesus is urging people to leave empty practices behind and to step out into the liberating truth that God's deepest joy is in how we treat one another, not in how we perpetuate the rituals of the religious institution.

But you and I well know that people, especially religious people, do not like change. We all know those famous words, "we've never done it that way before" or "this is our tradition." No, we don't like change and we don't like taking risks. In a world that often changes far too fast we find comfort in the seeming unchangeableness of religion as we know it.

So to that end the Pharisees and the scribes want to know what manner of behavior is this that Jesus is allowing his disciples to participate in. How can Jesus encourage people to leave behind the old and familiar in order to take up the new and unknown?

Jesus tells them they have lost track of God's purposes and that, though sincere, they have lost track of who God called them to be. Jesus reminds them that God desires flesh and blood compassion and integrity; he is saying we have to do more than say we love and trust God with our lips, but then fail to live in a way that reflects that in our day to day lives and worship.

When we trust God we are prepared to move and change; faith asks us to keep our hearts and minds open for the renewal and re-creation of our lives and worship. God is always creating and re-creating and we forget that sometimes we must let some things die or crumble so that God's newness can come in.

To this end, I'm reminded of a story that's been around a while, perhaps a cautionary tale, about the difficulty of change.

The story goes that once there was a grand and lovely old church whose identity was expressed by a large cross sitting high atop its steeple.

From every part of town people could see the cross, and when they did, they knew the church was there. The cross was what identified this church as “the church.”

One day a great storm blew up and the cross fell. This symbol of the church, this icon, fell. It twisted off the tower and came crashing through the roof. Fortunately no one was hurt, but the fallen cross left behind what seemed to be a large, gaping “God shaped hole.”

Now the members of this church responded to this crisis by doing what church people often do when facing crisis, they formed committees and had meetings. And as the members tried to figure out what to do, it became clear that there were two prevailing opinions.....

One was to try and restore the God shaped hole to the way it was before and to return the cross to its rightful place high atop the steeple. Everything would be returned to just the way it was..... But other people weren't so sure about that.

They weren't so sure about returning everything to the way it was. Maybe the cross fell because the underlying structures had deteriorated over time. Maybe the structure was failing and could no longer support it.

What if just filling in the God shaped hole and remounting the cross would only cover up a deeper problem? Maybe it was time to rethink the whole idea of the cross, maybe get a new lighter one that could be mounted closer to the ground.

This generated a lot of controversy of course, since members of the first group thought the church just wouldn't be the church without the cross high up on the steeple as it always had been. And so the people of the church found themselves in a struggle about what to do about this God shaped hole.

Now one of the things we know is that people do not like having God shaped holes in their lives. We want life to be organized and we want life to be understandable. We want faith to be simple and constant. We want God to be predictable and protective of our status quo. We do not like interruptions in our habitual patterns.

But, have we ever considered this? Have we ever thought that the monumental changes that we sometimes face in our lives, society and faith may not be bad things?

Do we ever consider that the Holy Spirit is the force behind the falling of familiar and constant things in the church and in our lives---- that maybe God is urging these things?

Instead of constantly trying to hold on to old and possibly deteriorating structures and practices we might ask instead, “What is God trying to say to us, are we being ask to move and grow?”

The whole message of Jesus invites us to constantly push against our love of the status quo; he shows us the sometimes difficult and changeable path we too must follow to keep our religion and faith from becoming empty and stale.

And it's not about just accepting everything new that comes along, but his words are a warning against being so tied to “old ways” that we miss God's invitation to be re-created and more authentic and whole in our quest to be the “Church”.

In the little picture we see this most readily in our own day to day when after a long and wonderful arc a ministry or a church program draws to a close or comes to an end--- for whatever reason. We weep and gnash our teeth and talk of something failing or dying and we must do all we can to prevent this or that from changing; we have to keep everything the same, or rebuild just as it was.

But these are our God shaped holes; these are most often the places we are called to celebrate what was and anticipate that God has something fresh and new to call us forward.

Cloud 9 is a perfect example of this; never in all my time as a priest have I witnessed a more graceful death and re-creation of a long-time church ministry.

There was lots of grief at the Clouds passing--- yes—just as it should be, but there was also resolute, hopeful and inspiring thought and action that propelled the mission of the Cloud into the future.

None of what went into Cloud 9 in terms of labor and love is lost. And because the reality of change was embraced, the legacy of Cloud 9 and the ECW will serve God well into the future in its new incarnation---far longer than if they had tried to keep it going “the way it always had been”. It's absolutely inspiring!

I've seen this same Spirit at work as we move to find a new Director for our music program. Yes, some people are fearful and what to “rebuild it just as it was” they see only change and it's unsettling---this is natural.

But what was so clear from the Focus groups is that as a whole we were very thankful for our previous music program and for all the ways it was so wonderful, but we are also very excited about the possibilities for the future; eager to see something new take shape.

It is a fact, both the larger "Church" and St. Stephen's are being moved in new directions. Old things are falling away and God shaped holes are popping up all over.

It is up to us to decide if we want to cling fearfully to the familiar, or to rebuild changing programs just as they were--- potentially leading us to die a slow and painful death----or do we want to trust that God is able and ready to help us re-create, re-vision, and welcome something new---keeping the best of the old while we leave the rest behind. And more importantly, can we trust one another and the Holy Spirit to help us know what to keep and what to throw away?

These are challenging but truly exciting times---our greatest hope is to be fearless in love and action, compassionate and forgiving in word and deed and vowing never to abandon the commandment of God to hold to human tradition. God always leaves the decision to us---may we choose fearlessly and wisely! Amen.

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