

“Listen, the Outsider is Not the Real Threat!

Steve Ramer

September 16, 2018

Scripture

Mark 6:53 - Mark 7:1

6:54 As soon as they had gotten out of the boat, people at once recognized him, 55 and they ran around all over the whole region and started bringing those who were sick on mats to wherever he was rumored to be. 56 And wherever he would go, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him to let them touch even the fringe of his cloak. And all those who managed to touch it were cured.

7:1 The Pharisees gather around him, along with some of the scholars, who had come from Jerusalem. When they noticed some of his disciples eating their meal with defiled hands, that is to say, without washing them. 3 (you see, the Pharisees, and the Judeans generally wouldn't think of eating without first washing their hands in a particular way, always observing the tradition of the elders, 4 and they won't eat when they get back from the marketplace without washing again and there are many other traditions they cherish, such as the washing of cups and jugs and kettles), 5 the Pharisees and the scholars start questioning him: "Why don't your disciples live up to the tradition of the elders, instead of eating bread with defiled hands?"

6 And he answered them, "How accurately Isaiah depicted you phonies when he wrote, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart stays far away from me. 7 Their worship of me is empty, because they insist on teachings that are human doctrines.' 8 You have set aside God's commandment and hold fast to human tradition."

9 Or he would say to them, "How expert you've become at putting aside God's commandment in order to keep your tradition!

...14 Once again he summoned the crowd and would say to them: "Listen to me, all of you, and try to understand! 15 there is nothing outside a person that can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."

17 When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples started questioning him about the riddle. 18 And he says to them: "Are you as dim-witted as the rest? Don't you realize that nothing from the outside can defile, 19 since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the outhouse?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.)

20 And he went on to say, "It is what comes out of a person that defiles. 21 For from out of the human heart, comes wicked intentions: Sexual immorality, thefts, murders, 22 adulteries, wickedness, deceit, promiscuity, envy, slander, arrogance and lack of good sense. 23 All these evil things come from the inside that defile..."

Sermon

For a couple weeks now I have been talking about difficult sea journeys and why the writer Mark, goes into such seemingly redundant repetition. These stories are more than simple boat trips.

They are powerfully symbolic stories that are trying to convey the importance that the good news of God's love must get to those, who are ethnically and culturally different on the "other side." But this great endeavor also faces great opposition from those forces that are arrayed against God's purposes and these forces can rise to seemingly mythic proportions.

According to Mark, great spiritual forces have been at work throughout human history to keep people separated. But Mark's Jesus was also well aware of the role humans play in this. The wealthy and powerful benefit from this ability to separate. And far too often religions are easily co-opted to legitimize this separation and to maintain the boundaries of who is in and whom is out.

Last Sunday I also posited that perhaps these two dangerous trips, to the "other side," might have ended up as failures. The initial journey seemed to be prematurely cut short after the exorcism of a Legion (a Roman division of soldiers) of demons, who were then "dismissed" into a "herd" (a Greek term for military recruits) of 2,000 pigs (the actual size of a Roman division).

The locals were quick to get Jesus back into his boat and outta town. Such brazen words and actions could have easily brought down the wrath of the brutal Roman occupation on the whole region. But in the end, Jesus, who can calm the seas and who also possesses the power to remove empirical armies, willingly capitulates to the locals leaving one solitary soul behind who's mind and thinking has been restored.

But Jesus was not done yet, he has a mission and nothing, not geographical barriers, nor cosmic spiritual forces can discourage him or turn him around. Mark describes Jesus' arrival on the other side with one of his fairly common formulas,

When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

Hmm... maybe that one act of kindness, of healing that one man possessed by so many demons had actually produced something? Seems like he had been pretty busy between trips since now Jesus has to literally walk over folks to get anywhere?

So “It’s all good man!” Right?

Nope, cause all those healing acts and all that brushing up against the poor and foreigners created a huge problem for some religious leaders.

First let me make it clear that these complaints had nothing to do with the lack of appropriate personal hygiene.

The issue for the Pharisees was regarding specific purity codes that help keep the boundaries of Jewish society and religion.

Jesus is not advocating that we eat with filthy hands or skip washing dishes.

The Pharisees, after all, were accusing his disciples of, “eating with defiled hands” not simply “dirty” hands.

Mark then adds, parenthetically, the actual differences in table manners between Jesus and the Pharisees.

“3 (you see, the Pharisees, and the Judeans generally wouldn’t think of eating without first washing their hands in a particular way, always observing the tradition of the elders, 4 and they won’t eat when they get back from the marketplace without washing again and there are many other traditions they cherish, such as the washing of cups and jugs and kettles)”

Ritual contamination was a constant concern of the Pharisee and once contaminated they would then have been excluded from participating in religious ceremonies until they had undergone thorough and often elaborate and expensive purification rituals.

Public places like the market were abundant with potential contamination. And as “purity police” they had the critical task to keep all those dreaded contagions quarantined!

Evidently they had caught some of Jesus’ followers, either failing to see the need to clean themselves from such impurities contracted through rubbing shoulders with the infectious or, perhaps, even worse they were actually sitting and eating with those virulent folks.

Now Jesus had already skirmished over the very same concerns with similar Jewish authorities on the Jewish side of the lake.

For the Pharisees such ritual purification, as well as kosher dietary rules served to preserve social boundaries in two ways.

Politically they helped define ethnic identity in a situation where there were no other overt differences (ie; clothes, hair styles, etc.)

And socially, who one ate with and what one ate reflected one’s status in the class hierarchy. (Myers 131)

And since Mark sets this debate in the marketplace suggest an economic dimension as well.

The Pharisees also regulated commerce and could deem any product as unclean at any stage of production or distribution.

Many, especially the poor, resented the interference of those “middlemen.”

In effect, Jesus’ followers were being accused of the high crimes of group disloyalty and of betraying cultural “tradition!”

Now the “traditions of the elders” was in fact a specific body of legal interpretation that the Pharisees claimed was equal to scripture.

Jesus’ counter act, as he quickly switches from defendant to prosecutor, rejected such equal authority of such, “human traditions.”

He then appeals to the authority of actual “commandments of God” as well as to scripture that supersede all other “traditions.”

Using Isaiah 29, Jesus’ was extremely harsh in his denunciation.

“How accurately Isaiah depicted you phonies when he wrote, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart stays far away from me. 7 Their worship of me is empty, because they insist on teachings that are human doctrines.’ 8 You have set aside God’s commandment and hold fast to human tradition.”

Need I go into much detail to point out how many political as well as some religious leaders are acting similarly today?

By holding on to the fears and stereotypes of traditions, as well as to the false notion that true community can be maintained by keeping “them out” not only is counter to the clear commands of God and of the teachings of scripture but they also betray what our nation espouses to value the most.

For those in attendance the message was clear.

But Mark wants to make sure its clear to his readers as well.

"Listen to me, all of you, and try to understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."

And, since the “moral” of the story is so important, (or so often easily misunderstood) Mark sees the need to repeat it.

18 And he says to them: “Are you as dim-witted as the rest? Don’t you realize that nothing from the outside can defile, 19 since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the outhouse?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.)

20 And he went on to say, "It is what comes out of a person that defiles. 21 For from out of the human heart, comes wicked intentions: Sexual immorality, thefts, murders, 22 adulteries, wickedness, deceit, promiscuity, envy, slander, arrogance and lack of good sense. 23 All these evil things come from the inside that defile..."

The outsider, the one who has been deemed ethnically, socially or economically impure simple cannot defile you, or your religion or threaten true community. And social boundaries constructed on the basis of purity codes and reinforced by human traditions are powerless to protect. Geographical barriers, such as walls or even seemingly mythical assumptions of military power or national identity are just as worthless.

Not only will they fail to preserve the sameness of the status quo but they are the actual seeds of a worse contagion that originates from inside. Our current situation exposes both powerfully and all too painfully this truth.

We are told by our leaders that in order to protect our nation from those who are coming across our southern borders to "rape" us, we must be willing to go to extreme measures! We must commit extreme amounts of money to build a wall and to militarize the boarder.

We must arrest and detain and refuse asylum to everyone. We must incarcerate 10 -20 thousand minors? and even separate young children from their parents (over 400 are still not reunited).

And in so doing we have put these children into prisons where some have literally been raped by staff at those facilities. Rather than address the root causes of why folks are fleeing to our country we instead victimize them again and again!

According to Ched Myers, Jesus has redrawn the borders of group identity. And all attempts at external purity are now replaced by an ethnicity of internal reflection and ethical behaviors. All foods are now declared clean and their purity is maintained by sharing it with anyone who is in need.

"Obstacles to building community with ethnic outsiders must be removed - no matter how fundamental they might seem to ones's own culture!"

And Myers adds,

‘This may at once be Jesus’ most radical and widely ignored teaching. It rejects all external boundaries as impotent to protect one’s community from perceived threats from the race and class of the “other.’ Excluding or insulating ourselves from outsiders cannot protect us or our character - only our own ethics and behavior can do that.”

This challenge was no doubt a hard pill to swallow for those who listened to Jesus back in the first century. And, no doubt, equally as difficult for us today! But the kingdom of God that we have been invited into, my sisters and brothers, is not based upon tradition, cultural similarities, ethnicity, economic similarities or upon any form of documentation, but it is based upon an ethical practice of “open borders!”

Jesus’ commitment to getting over to the other side does not depend upon us alone to make it a success. Thank God! But the effort and attempt of forging a truly new and genuine community of Jesus’ is really not an option!

“Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and try to understand...”

Myers, Ched. “Our God is Undocumented” Orbis press.

Steve Ramer

Pastor Fort Collins Mennonite Fellowship
300 E. Oak St.
Ft. Collins, CO 80524
(970) 412-7510