

PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST
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Text: Mark 7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23

A debate about authority and tradition; evil things come from within.

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his 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 honors 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: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

In the first church I served years ago, we used to have children read scripture once in a while in worship, and no one had a problem with it except for one person. She was a retired elementary school teacher, and she was a real stickler for doing things the proper way. She didn't actually mind having children read scripture, though. What she didn't like was the fact that they didn't always do the greatest job. Sometimes they'd read too softly, and you couldn't hear

them. Sometimes they'd mumble, and you couldn't understand them. And it really bugged her.

So I talked to her about it after church one day, and she told me that worship was a sacred time, and things had to be done with a sense of reverence. And as far as she was concerned, having kids get up there and stumble their way through the readings was not acceptable, and they shouldn't be allowed to do it.

When I look back on that conversation, I can see it both ways. On the one hand, I get where that woman was coming from. Worship is a sacred time, I agree, and we don't want to be careless about it. We want to give it all the dignity and respect it deserves. On the other hand, I think about how much it meant to those kids to get up there and lead worship with the adults. I think about how seriously they took that responsibility, and how much it made them feel like part of the church.

It's a question, I guess, of what do you want to put first—the integrity of the worship service or giving children a positive church experience that, who knows, they might remember for the rest of their lives?

That's the same basic question that comes up in the gospel reading today.

Jesus is dealing with people who remind me a lot of that woman in my first church years ago. They're sticklers for doing things the proper way.

A group of religious leaders comes to see Jesus, and they're horrified that his disciples don't wash their hands before they sit down to eat. But the issue for them isn't cleanliness. They're upset because the disciples aren't keeping what they call "the tradition of the elders."

Now, this wasn't the same thing as the Jewish law, but apparently it was still a big deal. The leaders turn to Jesus and ask him, "What's going on? Why are your disciples not following the rules?" And I get where they're coming from. Rules are important. They keep things running smoothly.

But Jesus sees it a little bit differently. He thinks the most important thing is not whether people follow the rules, but what they have in their hearts. Because what they have in their hearts, if it's not something good, is going to push them

away from each other. He names a bunch of evil intentions, everything from theft and murder to envy and pride, and when you think about it, what they all have in common is that they all cause hurt and division; they all destroy the bonds of trust and friendship that hold people together.

So just like in my first church years ago, the issue in this reading is, Are we going to prioritize traditions, or are we going to prioritize people? Are we going to prioritize rules, or are we going to prioritize relationships?

That's a tension that exists within the life of every church and every religious community. We need to have structure and order, but we also need to care for one another. It's a balancing act, and how we strike that balance says a lot about who we are—especially when people are meeting us for the first time.

When visitors show up on Sunday morning, it doesn't take long for them to figure out, Is this a place where people are sticklers for doing things the proper way? or Is this is a place where people meet each other where they are and make room for one another? Visitors pick up on that vibe pretty quickly, and it shapes the kind of experience they have—friendly and welcoming or cold and uncomfortable.

I read an article once titled "3 Ways Christians Turn People Off from Church." It was written by a pastor who grew up in a non-religious family and never went to church until he was an adult. So, he knew what it was like to be an outsider, and in the article he gives his perspective on three things Christians do that push people away—and they all had to do with striking that balance.

The first way that Christians turn people off from church is by leading with truth instead of leading with love.

We're all looking for truth in our lives. We just don't want to hear it from someone who's clearly not interested in getting to know us first. If we go to a church, and that's all the welcome we get—people telling us what to believe—we're probably going home after the service and never come back. Because that's a church that doesn't care about who we are; that's a church that's not interested in having a genuine relationship with us.

But if we go to a church, and people take the time to ask us about ourselves and find out what we're looking for and what we're interested in, we're going to come back week after week. Because that's a church that sees us as a real person and wants to connect with us in a meaningful way.

In the article, the writer tells a story about a guy who was coming to their church for a while, and was getting involved in different things, volunteering for this and that, and one day during coffee hour he confessed that he didn't believe any of the church's teachings. So someone asked him, "Then why do you keep coming?" and he answered, "Because I've never felt so loved before."

Before we open our mouths, we have to open our hearts. Before we speak, we have to listen.

The second way that Christians turn people off from church is by asking them to behave before they believe.

Like the person who wrote this article, not everyone grows up going to church. Not everyone knows what church culture is like. Not everyone knows what to do

and how to act. And yet God still reaches out to them and gives them a spiritual hunger. So, when someone like that shows up on Sunday morning, someone who doesn't seem to fit in, there's only one thing to say to them: Welcome, we're glad you're here. Make yourself at home.

Unfortunately, in a lot of churches, that's not the greeting people get. Instead, they get a lot of suspicious looks and awkward silences. And the message is clear: You're not acceptable the way you are. If you want to be one of us, you have to change. Which is a great way to make sure they never set foot in a church again.

So, if we really want to share God's love, then we have to stop thinking we know better than God. We have to stop thinking we know who belongs here and who doesn't. God brings all of us here for a reason, and we may not know what that reason is, but we have to respect it. And the way we do that is by seeing every single person who walks through our doors as one of God's children, no different than ourselves.

The third way that Christians turn people off from church is by basing community on shared beliefs instead of shared brokenness.

In every church, there are things that people have in common, things that connect them, and very often it's their religious beliefs, which isn't surprising. And isn't necessarily a problem, either. But sometimes faith communities hold their beliefs so tightly that there's no room for anyone who has even a slightly different view. And when that happens, our beliefs become a kind of litmus test, and instead of uniting all of us, they end up making some of us feel like we don't belong.

So instead of coming together around our shared beliefs, a better way would be to come together around our shared brokenness—the fact that we all live in a world that’s not perfect, and we all have messy lives, and we’re all looking to Jesus to make us whole.

The through line in all of this is the importance of putting people first.

That’s what I learned as a new pastor. That’s what I think Jesus is getting at in the gospel. And that’s what the writer of that article is saying.

Yes, rules and traditions are important. Yes, we need to do things with care. But in the end, that’s not what we’re here for. We’re here for each other, and we’re here for God. We’re here to build relationships that sustain us.

And I may be a tiny bit biased, but I think we do a pretty good job of finding the right balance here at Valley. But it’s something we always need to remember because, like I said, it’s tension that exists in the life of every church.

Let me close today with a prayer:

Loving God, the mission you’ve given your church is to seek the lost and help them find their way to you. But in our foolishness and pride, sometimes we make faith more difficult for people, and in so doing we violate our purpose. Help us to listen before we speak, to welcome without condition, and to acknowledge that no one has any ground on which to stand, except your grace. This we ask in Jesus’ name. Amen.