

August 29, 2021
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Pentecost 14
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Proper Preparation”

“... there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

Virginia Theological Seminary is the largest seminary of the Episcopal Church, the American branch of the Anglican Communion. The seminary, which will celebrate its 200th anniversary in 2023, has educated generations of bishops, priests, and deacons from around the world; it also educates teachers in the extensive Episcopal school system. I had the opportunity to spend three weeks on the VTS campus in Alexandria, Virginia in the summer of 2013 as a part of a program for ordained clergy. While many of my colleagues were Episcopal priests, our classes included students from several faith traditions from around the world, with me as the lone Lutheran representative. This often presented me with some unique challenges; often my professors or classmates would turn to me to get the Lutheran perspective on an issue that was being discussed (one memorable item was whether we needed our bishop’s permission to preside at the marriage of a couple who had previously been divorced). While this experience did not end as I had intended it, I gained a lot of new experiences and have fond memories of the weeks I spent on that campus with people whose traditions and experiences were different than mine, and very different from my experience at my Lutheran seminary.

A highlight of every day on the seminary campus was noon worship, which drew students, faculty, and staff from across the VTS community. While most worship was based on the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*, the seminary sought to be inclusive of the other faith traditions represented in the congregation, included one day that was designated for a communion service from our Lutheran worship book, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. This service was to be led by the one Lutheran member of the VTS community, the head librarian; but two days before the service, she was called out of town, so I was approached and asked if I would preside at this Lutheran service (being the only Lutheran pastor on campus). I naturally agreed, but soon learned that this would be a Lutheran communion service as understood by an Episcopal community. As soon as I entered the chapel, I saw that things would be different – from the vestments that were prepared for me to wear, to the way in which the altar was set, to even how the order or service had been set. Throughout the service, the worship assistants and I would whisper directions to each other, and there were a few

awkward moments as we tried to understand each other's approach to worship. One of the most memorable moments was as I was preparing the altar for Holy Communion and one of the worship assistants presented me with a silver bowl and pitcher of water. At first, I wasn't sure what this was about, so he instructed me to place my hands over the bowl while he poured water over them, and then offered me a towel to dry my hands. Since I always wash before meals, it seemed like the right thing to do; but later I discovered that we were participating in an ancient worship practice that is not a part of Lutheran tradition. That bowl is known as a *Lavabo Bowl*; it come from the Latin word "I shall wash" and is based on Psalm 26:6-7: "*I wash my hands in innocence, and go around your altar, O LORD, singing aloud a song of thanksgiving, and telling all your wondrous deeds.*" The Lavabo Bowl in used by the priest in Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions for the ritual washing of hands before the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer (the Roman Catholic *Apostolic Constitutions* state that "*the hands of the celebrants are washed just before the dismissal of catechumens.*"). The practice probably developed from the need to wash hands after receiving the gifts brought by the people at the offertory. As a celebrant washes their hands before presiding at the Lord's Supper, many pray "*Lord, wash away my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin*" (Psalm 51:2).

The use of a Lavabo Bowl is one of the practices that Lutherans identify as *adiaphora*, traditions and practices that are neither required nor forbidden. While it is essential to practice proper hygiene in the celebration of Holy Communion (especially during the current pandemic), such a practice is not required in our Lutheran worship tradition. The *Augsburg Confession* clearly states that the essential elements of worship in Lutheran congregations is the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the sacraments; all other traditions fall into the category of *adiaphora*.

- "It is also taught among us that there must be and remain one holy, Christian church. It is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel. For this is enough for the true unity of the Christian church that there the gospel is preached harmoniously according to the pure understanding and the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that uniform ceremonies, instituted by human beings, be observed everywhere. As Paul says in Ephesians 4:4-5, 'There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism.'" – Article VII,

But even though our Lutheran confessions make a clear distinction between essentials and *adiaphora*, between that which is required and that which is optional in worship, many traditions become such a part of our worship life that we mistake them for things that must take place, and any attempt to change or remove them is often met with stiff opposition. In my home congregation, Holy Communion was always distributed at the altar rail; everyone kneeled, and the pastor distributed both the bread and the wine. When it was proposed that we distribute communion in a continuous fashion and that a worship assistant offer the wine, there was a tremendous uproar, as if such a proposal was a denial of the Christian faith. Many traditions, as cherished as they may be, are often confused for elements that are essential in the worship and practice of our Christian faith.

For Jesus and his followers, the traditions and practices of the Jewish faith had governed their lives from birth and were still essential parts of their lives. The Torah offers guidance on every aspect of the lives of the people of Israel, including what they eat, what they wear, and how they are to prepare for meals and for worship. While many of these teachings are essential in the lives of observant Jews, other practices which we might identify as *adiaphora* had been elevated by some to the category of essentials, and any perceived violation of such an understanding was dealt with swiftly and harshly. This is the background for today's encounter in our Gospel lesson between "*the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem*" (Mark 7:1), who assembled around Jesus to challenge the behavior of his disciples, who they had noticed "*were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them*" (7:2). While the practice of hand washing has its origins in the Torah ("*They shall wash their hands and their feet, so that they may not die; it shall be a perpetual ordinance for them, for him and for his descendants throughout their generations.*" – Exodus 30:21), the objection of the Pharisees and scribes to the disciples' practice was based on *korban*, Jewish traditions and practices that had been established over the centuries ("*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.*" – 7:3-4). Their concern was not about the disciples' hygienic practices; they confront Jesus because they are offended that his disciples, in their view, do not "*live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands*" (7:5). The implication of their question is that if Jesus does not teach his disciples such rules of piety, he cannot be a true religious teacher.

The Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem are familiar enemies of Jesus ("*The*

Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him ... And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, 'He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.'" – 3:6, 22). Their question seeks to embarrass Jesus in front of the crowds and thus undermine his authority as a teacher.

- “Yet the scribes and Pharisees’ question implicitly criticizes those disciples. Even more, it indicts Jesus. Even though no Old Testament texts call for anyone to wash hands before eating, by Jesus’ day certain practices had arisen among some Jews. Why don’t all Jesus’ followers abide by these more recent customs? What kind of teacher leads his pupils to violate revered elders’ teachings, that is, the legal interpretations affirmed by at least these scribes and Pharisees?” – Matt Skinner.

Jesus refuses to take the bait and fall into the trap his opponents have laid for him. Instead, he points to Scripture in responding that *“Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’”* – 7:6-7; Isaiah 29:13). Jesus rejects his opponents’ claim that interpretations of the Torah, which are said to stem from the “elders,” are to govern a person’s behavior. What is “in the heart” forms the basis for the teaching that follow this exchange between Jesus and his enemies. Jesus identifies the “traditions of the elders” as “human precepts,” human interpretations that were originally designed to protect the Law and show how the Torah was to be put into practice, but which had become a heavy burden (*“They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.”* – Matthew 23:4). In rejecting these “traditions of the elders” that have been elevated to essential practices by these opponents, Jesus is in no way denying the validity of the Mosaic Law in general or its individual commandments; in the Sermon on the Mount, he clearly states *“do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”* (Matthew 5:17). Jesus rejects how certain interpretations – and thus, certain practices – may have deviated from or obscured the intent of laws meant to safeguard purity.

- “The Isaiah passage introduces a contrast between the lips/mouth and the heart, and Jesus builds on this contrast to transform the issue into one about defilement and how a human body becomes polluted. Simply put, impurity is a matter of the heart, not the mouth.” – Skinner.

Jesus rejects the critique of his opponents because “*you abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.*” (7:8).

Jesus then turns away from his opponents to address the crowd as a teacher. Their response demonstrates that Jesus has retained his authority to teach, which his opponents sought to discredit. Jesus asserts that nothing one eats or drinks can defile a person, for impurity comes from within: “*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.*” (7:14-15). Jesus affirms the centrality of the Word of God in the lives of his followers and attacks would-be defenders of the Law by subverting it; “*the criterion is fidelity to the intent of God’s commandment mediated through Scripture.*” (Lamar Williamson, Jr.). He rejects those who make “*void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this*” (7:13). Jesus lists those things that come from within that are the true source of evil intentions and defilement: “*fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.*” (7:21-23). This catalog of vices includes actions proscribed by the Ten Commandments; Jesus continues to uphold the commandment of God which he accuses his opponents of undermining in their insistence on the “traditions of elders” that obscure the teachings of God.

Discerning the true origin of defilement and how we properly prepare ourselves to receive God’s gifts remain an important part of our life and practice of the Christian faith that has been handed down to us from generations of God’s faithful people. The words of the prophet Micah remind us that God has “*told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.*” (Micah 6:8). Holy living means recognizing that “*all good gifts around us are sent from heaven above,*” that God provides all that we need for daily living “*out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all.*” (Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*). In response, “*I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.*” We are called to “*remember the Sabbath day and to keep it holy*” not by merely refraining from certain practices that occupy the other days of the week, but by understanding that “*we are to fear and love God, so that we do not despise preaching or God’s word, but instead keep that word holy and gladly hear and learn it.*” We come to the Lord’s Table recognizing that the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ as given and shed “*for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sins,*” and that while “*fasting and bodily preparation are in fact a fine external discipline ... a person who has faith in these words, ‘given for you’ and*

‘shed for you for the forgiveness of sin’ is really worthy and well prepared.” While we may cherish many of our traditions that have informed our worship and celebration of Holy Communion, proper preparation to receive the Lord’s Supper is not primarily about how we wash our hands, whether we stand or kneel, or who offers us the bread and wine; we are truly prepared to receive the Body and Blood of Christ when we approach the table of the Lord with thankful hearts that believe that this sacrament is *“for you for the forgiveness of sins,”* and that we leave the Lord’s Table transformed so that *“the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.”* (Psalm 19:14).

- “No one should walk away from the Lord’s Supper unchanged ... Seeing and being seen is a very useful exercise, since bodily movement at the Table is an announcement of intentions. Not ‘Look at me, folks, how pious I am for being here!’ The day when attending church gave you status is long past. Instead, ‘Look at me, folks, as I look at you. We are sinners, but we are participants in the body and blood of Jesus Christ. We get to see what prophets and kings wanted to see but could not. We are part of the New Creation. Our bodies are on the line. We are committed.” – Martin Marty.

I gained a greater understanding and appreciation for the worship traditions of the Episcopal Church during my weeks in Alexandria, but those traditions did not follow me back to my congregations. Our traditions may be beloved and familiar, but we should never confuse them with the essentials of worship or allow them to take precedence over what is most important: hearing the Word of God and living according to God’s teachings. Proper preparation for worshiping the Lord and serving as God’s people means living in accordance with that which is central to walking as a child of the light:

- “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” – Matthew 22:37-39.

We cherish our Lutheran traditions, but may we never let that we which cherish take precedence over what is most essential: hearing the Word of God and going into the world to love and serve the Lord as God’s holy people.

Amen