

15th Sunday after Pentecost B 01 September 2024

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

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

[Jesus] said to them, '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." You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.' Let's pray: ...

Perhaps you've heard this statement with the blank filled in by one thing or another: Anyone who _____, isn't a real Christian. I'm sure you could come up with plenty of your own examples but here are a few I've come across before:

- Anyone who can't speak in tongues, isn't a real Christian.
- Anyone who believes in infant baptism, isn't a real Christian.
- Anyone who supports the ordination of women in the LCANZ, isn't a real Christian.

(Yes! I've actually had all of these things said to me.)

People have all sorts of ideas that are shaped by what they've been taught, their beliefs, and their prejudices. Some of them may even be right in rejecting some behaviours or recommending others. But all of them are dead wrong when they express their opinion in this way – Anyone who _____, isn't a real Christian. Why? Because they give the impression that Christianity consists of nothing more than a straight-jacketed programme of behaviour. They reduce Christianity to moral absolutism or a list of rules. What they overlook is how Christianity is steeped in spirituality. You simply can't grow fruit if you neglect the roots.

Something else we have to think about when we toss around statements like: Anyone who _____, isn't a real Christian, is: Who gets to be the judge? Play God? If we adopt this attitude, we include ourselves as Christians don't we; you know, the acceptable people, the insiders, and exclude other people who don't measure up to our expectations. And we do this on behalf of Christianity, in the name of Jesus Christ.

Does Christ choose people based on a list of their personal attributes? Do we see in the gospels, Jesus putting up barriers to keep people out; you know, those pesky sinners? No. Jesus opens his arms wide to welcome people; especially the people who have experienced heaps of rejection by others.

Anyone who _____, isn't a real Christian. There's a real problem with statements like this. I'm not suggesting that anything goes, that we should just enjoy the freedom to do anything we like. Morality does matter. But I firmly believe that there's a lot more to Christianity than our behaviour.

Sure, there are certain expectations of what constitutes Christian behaviour and certain behaviours that don't meet those expectations. Yet, we'll still differ over these matters too. And when there's disagreement, all parties will take an ethical position and expect that there's some way Christian faith can deal with it; the success of which is easily measured by the current impasse concerning ordination in our church. For all the careful attention and prayer we devote to ethical issues, our ethical insights alone don't define us as Christians either. We simply aren't permitted to ring fence ourselves and shut out others whom we believe to be unenlightened.

In fact, there are so many items we could fill the blank space with that sooner or later you, I, and every other person who may dare to claim the name of Christian, wouldn't be allowed to do so. We'd end up on the outside of the barricades looking in. We must remember that St Paul says, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God;" (Romans 3:23).

The great relief and joy for us, brothers and sisters, is found in realising that while our Christianity certainly should shape our behaviour, our Christianity runs deeper than our behaviour. Christianity has compelling suggestions for how we're to live each day, but it's also important to remember that Christianity is deeply spiritual, faith empowers our actions, and the greatest commandment of all is... love. The seed of a new life must germinate and grow before it can bear the fruit of that new life.

In today's gospel, some Pharisees and scribes criticise Jesus' disciples for failing to keep traditional practices. In effect, they're saying that those who fail to do these things can't be people of faith. The Pharisees and scribes are busy building barriers, putting themselves on the inside, and pushing others out.

There are undoubtedly also people in that community who fill in the blank on the flip side to the attitude of the Pharisees who say: You don't have to keep these practices to be people of faith. In today's terms: You don't need to go to church to be a Christian. Both groups miss the boat! Both judge in terms of behaviour alone. They don't look at what underpins behaviour. The problem isn't the practices themselves, but when they're interpreted in ways that mask the real issues.

Jesus drives directly to the heart of the matter. He basically says: Stop judging one another's behaviour! Don't be concerned with matters of morality alone! Look at what motivates your own behaviour. That's where the problem is. That's where you can make something happen. Change your hearts. Grow clean hearts of flesh rather than hard hearts of stone. Dig beneath the surface of what you see and find the places where love will serve your neighbour best. Rather than saying, "You're not doing it right"; ask, "Where does it hurt? How can I help?" The disorder on the surface of our lives reflects the disorder within.

That's why Jesus came down from heaven - to help us change our hearts.

This is no easy task. It's mysterious as well:

- It happens in an instant, yet takes a lifetime.
- It depends entirely on God, yet involves our receptivity.
- It makes us new people, yet we become the people we've always wanted to be.

The story is told of an old man who said, "When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world. I found it was difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my nation. When I found I couldn't change the nation, I began to focus on my town. I couldn't change the town and as an older man, I tried to change my family.

Now, as an old man, I realise the only thing I can change is myself, and suddenly I realise that if long ago I had changed myself, I could have made an impact on my family. My family and I could have made an impact on our town. Their impact could have changed the nation and I could indeed have changed the world."

Saints, don't let judgement or the way you think things should be, be the measure of your Christianity. God wants to do a new thing today. Let's be open for God to do a new thing in our lives. Let's be open for God to do a new thing in our church. We live in a new day with new challenges, and we need to hear the word of the Lord for today.

So, come to Jesus because he is changing hearts today. Allow his pure and beautiful gospel to spring clean and throw out all of the rubbish in your hearts. Let the way of his cross do some interior decorating and the outward expression will take care of itself. Let the love that Christ has for you flow out and shine the light of his gospel into the lives of others. Let's abandon human tradition and hold to God's commandment to love. The law kills but the gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of life, love, and salvation. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.