

Calvary Episcopal Church
Ashland, Kentucky
Sermon for September 2, 2012 ~ Proper 17B
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

Today, we return to the gospel of Mark. The gospel readings for the remainder of this liturgical year, through November, will be from Mark. When we look at the literary structure of this part of the gospel, and it is important to do so if we want to really appreciate the witness of this gospel writer, we are impressed with how this part of Mark we will be reading is a section of material that portrays Jesus as extremely popular as a teacher and healer, traveling back and forth to both sides of the Sea of Galilee, ministering to Gentiles and Jews alike. In this portion of the gospel, we also see the disciples continuing difficulty in understanding Jesus.

Just as Jesus spoke and ministered to Jews and Gentiles alike, we believe the writer of the gospel of Mark had both Jews and Gentiles in his congregation. So, he often arranged his material in a way that would address both groups at the same time. There were things about Jewish ceremonial laws and customs that he had to explain to his gentile converts since they did not grow up in that religious tradition. And, there were Jewish Christians who probably never quite lost the tug toward their past with its rich traditions, authoritative voices, and familiar rituals.

In this as in many congregations today, there exists a similar need to be able to speak a word to at least two distinct groups who come to the community of faith from different backgrounds: there are those who've just come here from the outside, as it were; and, there are those who've been here all along. Add to those differences the difference in the way generations approach things in general and it gets even more interesting. But what they have in common is this: they all struggle to understand one another, and both struggle to understand Jesus! An essential part of our work together during this time of transition between rectors has been to foster understanding that strengthens this diverse community of faith. But in order to do that, we've had to participate in a process that requires us to reach out and open up to each other. Those of you who are accustomed to being in charge of things here and know where the light switches are and how things are done around here must not assume that those who are new to Calvary have the same insider information. And, those of you who are new to Calvary must not assume that you have to sit on the sidelines and keep your views to yourself just because you are new to this community.

As we turn to today's passage from Mark, we find Jesus in Galilee. The Pharisees and some of the scribes confront him because his disciples are eating without having performed the ritual washing of their hands. They charge that in neglecting this ceremony, the disciples are offending God. Jesus responds by pointing out their hypocrisy. Then he turns to the crowd and explains to them that it is not what goes into a person's stomach that defiles a person but rather what comes out from the heart. Then, he takes his disciples inside the house to provide a further explanation. He knows that when he is gone, the disciples are going to have to deal with situations like this, so he is training them and undergirding them with his truth.

What is at stake here? Surely this is not the first time these ceremonial practices had been challenged and it would not be the last. What is at stake is this: none of us ever outgrows the need to have Jesus confirm anew that the path of discipleship is liberating and life-giving. His followers then and now

need to carefully avoid letting legalities and customs take the place of the marvelous new creation he is bringing about in our hearts. Old habits tend to live long past the traditions that gave them birth!

James was concerned about this happening in his time and so advised "the implanted word will save your lives." That "implanted word" comes from the presence and participation of the living Christ in the life of our community of faith.

Don't raise your hands, but how many of you are familiar with Calvary's mission statement? Here it is: *To seek and serve Christ through Worship which invigorates and challenges, Education which equips every member for a ministry, Fellowship which nurtures all ages, Giving of ourselves for the sake of those who do not yet belong.* And here's what we have to ask, all of us, young and old, newcomer and veteran: Is it true? How is it true? Are we who we say we are?

It is necessary to ask those questions and to struggle with the answers because authenticity is at stake. The longer I am involved in the Church, the more convinced I am that it is not our doctrines or our rules or our sacred customs that attract those seeking Christ and strengthens their life in Christ. Those things have their role to play. But the primary thing that attracts people and keeps them involved is the authenticity of those who claim to be Christ's hands and heart.

The key to this authenticity check up is for us to look at ourselves inside out, instead of concentrating on what is external to us. We need to examine our hearts and face up to the things that lurk there. It is those things all these laws and policies and rules seek to protect us from. Those things must be dealt with from the inside out, not the outside in. They can be transformed and held in check only by the presence of Christ in our lives. He knows how much we need his help. And so do we!

We are aware of the sin in our lives. I recall the story of a church that held midweek evening prayer services. There was a man who never missed those services and every week he prayed, "Lord, clear the cobweb of sin out of my life." Finally, one evening, after he prayed that prayer, another member who was tired of hearing the same prayer week after week prayed, "Lord, forget the cobweb, kill the spider!"

Once a reporter told Billy Graham, "Dr. Graham, I write all the time about the horrible things people do, but I have trouble swallowing what you preachers say about original sin." Dr. Graham replied, "Why, you don't have to swallow it, it's inside you already."

As individuals and as a community, we need the help of Jesus Christ to transform the darkness into light!

How do we do this? Let's return to the mission statement for a moment. It says we are engaged in an ongoing process of seeking and serving Christ. It is a process that humbly admits we are not finished, we are not yet complete, and we are actively moving toward knowing and loving Christ.

The mission statement also says we seek and serve Christ through worship, education, fellowship, and giving. And those are things we do together, in Christian community. That means we are not looking for the shadow, not trying to point out flaws and faults in others, but instead our purpose is to look beyond the shadow to see the Christ that dwells within them. What Jesus wanted the Pharisees to do as

religious leaders was to be more concerned with finding the new being that was struggling to be liberated within themselves, then point it out in others and not to be so concerned with the sin behind which that new creature is hiding. They were doing neither; therefore he called them hypocrites, imposters. They were not who they said they were. They were not spiritual guides but self-righteous critics who were concerned with the form of religion and not the substance.

The mission statement requires that we approach one another and those in the mission field at our doorstep as we would approach Christ himself. In our Baptism, we declare that we have been made one with Christ. When we believe that applies to those around us as well, it makes a difference in how we relate to them. And, like Jesus, we have to go beyond Baptism. If we follow his teaching and example, we will find ourselves eating with people who, so to speak, haven't washed their hands, people who don't even pretend to be washed and scrubbed and are so far behind the spiritual curve that they may not even bother, "all sorts and conditions of people."

My ministry with you may look sort of like the method of Jesus, who took the disciples aside to offer further explanations, because your ministry here carries on after I'm gone. So I keep asking you to look within and recognize Christ in your innermost being. Spend some time with him. Ask him to break down whatever walls and defenses you have erected to protect yourself from whatever frightens and threatens you. Then, when you've begun to make progress, having recognized Christ within yourself, you will be able to begin to recognize him in others, and not just in the people you like or understand, either. When you do, show him the same love and respect in them as in yourself.

You know, there are those red doors on our church. Have you ever thought about them? Do you think they are red just because that attracts attention? I've heard a number of stories about how the trend began to paint the doors of Episcopal Churches red began. Let me suggest the explanation I prefer. When the angel of death passed over the houses in Egypt, the Hebrew were instructed to paint the doorposts and lintels of their houses with the blood of a spotless lamb as a sign that death and all its horrors should not enter there. Each year after that time, a spotless lamb was sacrificed annually when they commemorated their liberation from bondage. In the Christian version of Passover, the spotless lamb is Jesus, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world and who has overcome death. Those red doors of ours are there to remind us and all who come and go from this place that the blood of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, has been shed for us. He takes away the sin of the world and lives within each of us and within this community of his followers. The red doors remind us that we – *of all people* – have been liberated and given divine help to humbly devote ourselves to some unique work in the mission field just outside.

Jesus tells us that it's an inside job. Each of us is responsible for her or his own discipleship. When we take responsibility and work on ourselves from within, we will be better able to participate in *seeking and serving Christ through Worship which invigorates and challenges, Education which equips every member for a ministry, Fellowship which nurtures all ages, Giving of ourselves for the sake of those who do not yet belong.*