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Scripture

Mark 7:1-23

¹ Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, ² they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. ³ (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴ 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.) ⁵ 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?” ⁶ 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; ⁷ in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’ ⁸ You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

⁹ Then he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! ¹⁰ For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ ¹¹ But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban’ (that is, an offering to God)—¹² then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, ¹³ thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.”

¹⁴ Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

¹⁷ When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸ He said to them, “Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, ¹⁹ since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰ And he said, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. ²¹ For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²² adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

Devotional

During both the Advent and Lenten holiday seasons, my family revels in seemingly innumerable traditions. That has played a large part in my enjoyment of the holidays, as the familiarity of ritual and tradition is, to me, calming and soothing, a welcome reminder of familial intimacy and shared history. As much as we may rejoice in those traditions, however, it is a mistake to confuse them with holiness.

“For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come.” Putting too much focus on old, comfortable external practices can blur the line between that which is understandably precious, and that which is truly sacred, and in its worst iteration, it can breed an attitude of “otherness” much like the disciples encountered from the Pharisees. Take joy in traditions, but not at the expense of spiritual introspection, while remembering that they can neither defile nor purify. All human hearts are flawed, and it is through Christ alone that we find redemption.

Prayer

Gracious God, help us always to remember to keep our hearts close to you in preparation for your kingdom—and be bold enough to step outside of our traditional comfort zones. Let our spiritual growth be surrendered to you, Lord, as we relinquish our need to control and find that which truly calms and soothes. Amen.