

14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9 / Psalm 15 / James 1:17-27 / Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

It's great to see everyone this morning, and hello to those watching virtually. This week might be called the real "end of summer" as we inch closer to that clear signal of a season change, Labor Day. It may not mean it's time to put away your white shoes, if you grew up or heard of when people actually did that after Labor Day, no kidding. And it may not mean there won't be any more beach days, or blooms in our gardens, or cookouts. All that may not end next week, even though teachers and students are back to work or getting really close to being so.

These are just a few of the traditions we have for the seasons of the year, the seasons of our lives. This morning, after a month-long journey through the meaning of "the bread of life" in Saint John's gospel, we've come back to Mark. The timing couldn't be better, as we hear biblical writers and evangelists weighing in on human values and behaviors. On traditions. What's important and what's not? Are our values practical? Spiritual in nature, or both?

In the gospel reading we just heard, Jesus was protesting against human customs or traditions being treated like they were laws from above, and how in the process we might ignore the meaning of God's law. He uses a great example: washing your hands.

We can get all scholarly and trace back the importance of dietary laws in Jewish culture, and we should remember that when Saint Mark is writing, all Jesus' followers are Jewish. The Hebrew scriptures were one thing – the Torah – but there was also a collection of rabbinical interpretations of scripture, the Talmud, which exists through today. And Talmudic debates were going on even in Jesus' time, in the first century.

Handwashing before eating wasn't a command found in the Hebrew scriptures; it was a custom. Here's how I learned that. I grew up in the Midwest, in Dearborn, which is a suburb of Detroit, Michigan. My family was active in our Lutheran church, which was only two or three blocks from home, so as us kids got older we were allowed sometimes to walk to and from church ourselves.

I went to confirmation class there before the family moved East, to a small town in Connecticut, before I started high school. My confirmation class was taught by the assistant pastor, who was younger and more hip and less scary than the senior pastor, or so it seemed to me at age 12. I remember him explaining that many of the food and eating

traditions of the Jewish people grew from the time they were nomads, traveling in the wilderness and not cooking their food very long or very well over open fires. For some reason that stuck with me, and I remembered it the first time I read today's gospel text, years ago.

Today Jesus uses handwashing and cites the Hebrew scriptures to lend authority to his point: that human behaviors and traditions don't necessarily line up with God's commandments. He tells the crowd that impurity doesn't come from tradition, like handwashing, but that sin – evil – comes from inside us, from impurity in our hearts.

In our second reading from the book of James, the writer defines religion in terms of ethical behavior. And somewhat differently from Mark, he focuses on how sin may also come from the outside, from the nonreligious world.

James sees there can be a gap between knowledge – what we know in our minds about God, and wisdom – living and acting from the soul what we know about God. This was a gap that existed in his religious community 2,000 years ago, and it's a critical gap in many of our communities today.

Martin Luther wasn't a big fan of how the book of James emphasizes works – actions – over relying on faith in God for our salvation. But like the Torah, and like Mark, James

also calls on us to receive our wisdom from on high, rather than giving in to the passions and desires we may feel from within.

I'm still kind of stuck on handwashing, though, No matter what Jesus says, I still think handwashing is a good idea. How many of you can hear your mom's voice in your head, calling you in from outside with "It's time for supper, now go wash your hands?" How many times have you said these words? They echo from our parents, and certainly from our nurses and doctors in the current health crisis.

The fact is, I *do* care about what Jesus says. (And so did my mom, for the record.)

Today's gospel isn't just about washing hands, it's about the tradition and authority behind the practice. Jesus challenges the Pharisees as to how their traditions may keep them from their mission of keeping God's instruction and staying in relationship with God and the covenant.

When the Pharisees question why some disciples don't "live according to the tradition of the elders" they're not talking about handwashing, either; they're asking just who Jesus thinks he is to ignore their customs.

Jesus challenges the authorities on their traditions being at odds with their mission...and it makes me wonder whether we shouldn't be looking at our mission, and our traditions.

Some of us may smile at the Pharisees being so uptight and fussy about tradition, but how about us, if we wanted to question some of ours? Maybe changing worship in ways that make it more understandable and accessible to a younger generation? Or maybe stop using the lectionary of readings and just move through the narrative of the Bible each week? Or disbanding all our committees to find a better way for our congregation to function?

How about removing all the pews from the sanctuary to make the space more flexible so we could have many more community groups using it? Or if once a month instead of church in this building, everyone was out doing community service somewhere in Suffolk County? Just a few possibilities.

Our traditions are more than just habits; they show us what's been right and wrong in the past and so they give us a sense of stability. We have some great ones at Saint Andrew's – I've especially loved learning about the Lights of Love tradition at Christmas time, and the gift the congregation gives each of the newly baptized.

The day before yesterday I was back at the church that sponsored me as a seminarian, where I was organist for ten years, where I did my field education. I went to play for the funeral of a beloved community patriarch. Friday was the first time the congregation was

taking communion since 2020 – Saint Barnabas is still using the Service of the Word – and they were struggling with those communion cup sets we know so well. BTW the supply pastor covering the funeral had figured out a procedure for it, and nobody was interested in how our “tradition” of dealing with the communion sets might help introduce them to the congregation on this sad day.

But the talk of communion practices reminded me of one of their lovely traditions: the people gather at the communion rail, and once the elements have been served everyone holds hands with the person next to them until they’re blessed and dismissed back to the pews.

Today’s gospel can help us revitalize our traditions – should we really hold them all sacred? – and can also help us focus on the more important concern of helping us care for each other.

What traditions are we willing to change to reach new people with the Gospel? What are we unwilling to change – what traditions preserve our sense of an orderly world and shore up our identity and can’t be touched, whether they help us achieve our mission? By asking ourselves, and the people who are not here in church, what would need to change

to make worship and community more accessible, meaningful, and helpful, we may begin to put mission ahead of tradition.

Our liturgy and traditions are intended to draw the community together in the service of God and God's law of love. But we need to be saved most of all from ourselves, more than from opponents or those who believe differently.

In our human hearts rest both great good and great evil. And so we need to hear Jesus calling us, to look inside of ourselves and speak "the truth from our heart" as today's psalm says.

We may realize that it's way more than our hands that need washing. And wash us Jesus does.

Come, Lord Jesus, and save us from ourselves.

To him, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be all honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.