

2021 08 29 – Law of Compassion

Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23 (The Inclusive Bible)

One of first things that came into my mind as I read this passage was the image of my father coming in from the barn for lunch on a summer day. He would always stop at the sink by the back door and wash his face, his hands and his lower arms. Often, it was easy to see where he had stopped, because the rest of his arms would be covered in grease or dirt or grain dust depending on his task for that morning. This hand & arm washing was a ritual that my father performed every day of his life.

Hand washing is something that has become ritualized for all us over the past eighteen months. When COVID-19 arrived we were very quickly made aware of the importance of washing with soap and water and were given detailed instructions on how to do it and how long it should take. Even before the pandemic there were signs in the washrooms of every restaurant reminding the staff to wash their hands. We all know that handwashing is important because we understand that dangerous viruses and bacteria can easily enter our own bodies, or be spread to others, through our hands.

The cleanliness laws that were followed in Jesus' day had been established hundreds of years before he was born and at least three thousand years before the identification of bacteria and viruses. These priestly laws, are found in Leviticus, one of the oldest books in the Hebrew Scriptures. Some of the laws

were written specifically for priests in the temple, but were adapted over the years and became common practice for Jewish people. However, the author's suggestion that Jewish people "never [ate] without washing their arms as far as the elbow" was definitely an exaggeration. Many of practices that Mark's gospel identifies as "tradition," such as rinsing food purchased from the market or the "washing of cups and pots and dishes", are of course now more than just tradition; they are recognized as necessity.

All of this to say that there is nothing specifically wrong with Jewish traditions then or now. Most of them arose from experience and were created for valid reasons, reasons of safety and security. Even if they are not needed for that purpose today, many Jewish people still follow them as a way of preserving their unique identity.

In our secular society, we also have laws that have been put in place to protect us. It's not hard to think of examples such as: the wearing of masks in public places during a pandemic, wearing seatbelts in cars and planes, and reducing the air pollution created by our vehicles. We, in the United Church, also have religious traditions that we follow that help us to know who we are. We have specific ways of celebrating communion, performing a baptism and even passing the peace.

So if there is nothing wrong with laws or traditions, why is Jesus so upset when the Pharisees and religious scholars ask him, "Why do your disciples not respect the tradition of our ancestors, but eat their food with unclean hands?" Jesus calls

them hypocrites, quotes a verse from Isaiah and says, “You disregard God’s commandments and cling to human traditions.”

Jesus is upset because the Jewish leaders are focussing so much on cleanliness laws and other traditions that they sometimes ignore the most basic of God’s commandments. In the verses that were left out of today’s scripture reading, Jesus gives an example of just such a grievance. He notes that one of the Ten Commandments is to “honour your mother and your father.” And one of the traditions of their faith is to sacrifice food to God. But sometimes food that could be offered to hungry parents is burned for God instead. Jesus is angry because Jewish leaders allow and even expect their followers to let their aging parents go hungry so God, and the priests, can be fed.

Jesus is clear that following God’s commandments, and especially the commandment to love our neighbour is much more important than any human laws or traditions. For him, feeding the hungry is more important than ritual washing or sacrifices in the temple. For Jesus, it is what comes from the heart—good or bad—that is important, not what goes into the body. He doesn’t have anything against tradition. He just wants to make it clear that God’s law of love and compassion far outweighs any human laws or traditions, Jewish or otherwise.

So what does this mean for us? Are there laws or traditions that we follow that could or should be reconsidered? Are there times when following the law, as it is written, is not the compassionate or the loving thing to do? Are there times

when we need to do even more than what the law demands in order to truly love our neighbour?

Let us consider again the pandemic in which we are living. The threat of the coronavirus, and now its variants, has made these questions very real. Have the cleanliness laws been too strict or not strict enough? As they are being removed do we assume that the risk has disappeared or do we go beyond what is required by our government? These are questions that every person, every business, every school division and every church are now dealing with. These are questions that our Church Council will be considering this Thursday as they grapple with the decision to return to in-person worship. What is the loving and compassionate course of action?

Laws, whether they are religious or secular, have been put in place for the good of society. So it is important for us to remember that they shouldn't be used as weapons to judge, condemn or ostracize others. During the pandemic, we have been made aware of those who live in crowded and impoverished conditions; those who find it much more difficult to follow our government's cleanliness rules. So, rather than condemning them for increasing our infection rates, we have been looking to find ways to help them stay safe.

Similarly, when people break the other laws of our society, we need to take the time to listen to their story and then determine the appropriate action to take. Our court systems and our prisons are filled to the brim with people who are living on

the margins of our society. What is the compassionate, the just, the loving way to deal with their infractions?

So today, I am leaving you with a question:

How do we weigh the need to protect ourselves
with God's commandment to love our neighbour?

Put another way:

How do we live out God's law of compassion?