

**The Rev. Dr. Jan C. Heller**  
**Proper 17, Year B, Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23**  
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**Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA**

In last week's sermon, Karen said two things that stayed with me. First, she told us about her prayer, while traveling in the Holy Land, that God would help her to cry less. What struck me about this is that I've been praying to cry *more*, that is, that I will let myself become vulnerable enough to feel and to show my emotions. Moreover, I was acutely aware this past week that there is plenty to cry about—the resurgence of Covid, the increasing devastation resulting from climate change, the deep political divides in our country, the hurricane coming ashore in Louisiana, and the seemingly never-ending suffering of the people in the Middle East, too much of it caused by us. Karen's prayer about her tears reminded me of the Three Wounds that Julian of Norwich wrote about. She argues that Christian spiritual growth is accompanied by these three wounds, one of which is the wound of compassion. As we grow into the likeness of God, she says, we become more compassionate for all who suffer, near and far, and this compassion eventually wounds us. Tears are both a sign that our compassion is expanding to be more like God's compassion and a gift that provides some relief from our own suffering related to that compassion.

Second, Karen also made a few comments about rules, and particularly (if I heard her correctly) about how rules can be misused to exercise power over others. And as much as I was interested in her comments about tears, her discussion of rules provides a helpful introduction to my sermon today. For today's lessons from the Old Testament, the Epistle, and the Gospel are *all* about rules! Deuteronomy is set just as the Israelites are poised to enter the Promised

Land and, in the lesson, we hear Moses admonish them to observe “diligently” the more than 600 “statutes and ordinances” given to them in the wilderness. James is admonishing Jewish Christians to follow the “perfect law, the law of liberty”—and yet, a liberty that nonetheless requires his readers to “bridle their tongues” and to “keep oneself unstained by the world.” And Mark shows us a not uncommon internal debate between groups of Jews about the status of the many purity laws or rules that were handed down to them from their ancestors.

I’ll have more to say about the Gospel lesson momentarily. But before I do, I want to remind us that we Christians should not be too quick to look down on Jews for their concern about rules. This has been a Christian criticism through the centuries, and it is usually misplaced. Like human beings generally, Christians have rules for just about everything, and even those who claim *not* to follow rules are using a rule to make that claim. We have rules for etiquette at communion and rules for how our clergy and laypeople should behave. Our culture and institutions are made up of rules, explicit and implicit, and this includes our church. Also, with the wider society, we share legal, moral, and other rules to guide our behavior. We have rules of thumb to guide our tasks, rules for games, rules for family life, rules for work, rules for interacting with family, friends, and strangers, rules for driving, and even rules for war. You get the idea. Humans have many, many, rules, and Christians do as well.

And so, turning to the Gospel lesson...as I mentioned, the rules that Jesus and the Pharisees were arguing about were purity rules. Again, we Christians have those kinds of rules, too. Before Covid, when Karen washed her hands before consecrating the bread and the wine, she was symbolically purifying herself ritually. With Covid, it is also a physical purification. However, the Jewish purity

laws that the Pharisees were pushing on Jesus and his disciples—indeed, on all Jews—were less about physical purity and more about ritual purity. The Pharisees had adapted strict purity rules that, before this time, had been reserved largely for priests and their families, and they were then urging all Jews to observe these rules. Behind these rules, was a more general and probably an absolute rule (that is, a rule admitting no exceptions) about holiness. This notion was rooted in the covenant between God and the Jewish people. Jews were to be holy like God is holy; it marked them out as God’s chosen people. And, as evidenced in the Ten Commandments, holiness required *both* ritual and moral purity (ritual *impurity* is a sort of stain or pollution and moral impurity is a sin). To make something holy, whether a religious item or a person or an entire people, requires that it be “set aside” for special use, that is, it requires that it be dedicated to God for God’s purposes and glory. At their best, the Pharisees were trying to bring holiness to all aspects of their everyday lives, but at their worst, they were coercing people to follow the same rules they were—here, think of Paul before his conversion persecuting Jewish Christians, even to the point of death. The other reason the Pharisees were pushing these rules had to do with their fear of losing their Jewish identity under the pressures of the Roman occupation and the Greco-Roman pagan culture surrounding them. This was not an unrealistic fear—it happened to many Jews, as we know from historical studies of this time period. Nonetheless, as we see in today’s lesson, not all Jews were persuaded that all these purity laws should be granted the *status* that the Pharisees had granted them.

So, Jesus would have agreed with the Pharisees that the covenant between God and the Jewish people *absolutely* required holiness, and he would have observed many of the same ritual purity laws the Pharisees observed—for

example, he told one person he had healed to wash and present himself before the priests. And, he shared the Pharisees' concern that Jews might lose their identity by consciously or unconsciously adopting pagan beliefs and customs. However, he evidently put much less weight on ritual purity and more weight on moral purity than the Pharisees and scribes who were criticizing him. We can't tell as we listen to the lesson being read, but Jesus' teaching on purity in this lesson was directed to three audiences. To the Pharisees and scribes who came from Jerusalem to test him, Jesus accused them of hypocrisy, of doing ritual acts of purity but ignoring moral purity. To the crowds listening to his exchange with the Pharisees, he explains that holiness is not affected by what goes into a person (that is, whether they eat without washing their hands which, again, was more about ritual impurity), but by things that come out of a person. And last, to his disciples alone, he explains that those things that do "come out" originate in the human heart, which is a symbolic way of talking about the seat of our intentions. Thus, Jesus, says, it is not only the disciples' *actions* that must be pure but their *intentions* as well.

Now, there's a lot of complexity in this discussion that I've glossed over for the sake of brevity and you'll probably be happy to hear that I cut whole paragraphs on the different types and levels of rules and the way they function—ethicists can be like lawyers in this way; we spend our professional lives dealing with rules. Instead, I will end with a contemporary example, one that might be provocative, though I use it only to illustrate how these purity rules haven't gone away. That example concerns the current controversy in our country about mask wearing. For perhaps most of us, wearing a mask is about physical purity, that is, simply about the prevention of the transmission of water droplets containing the

Covid virus. For others, it's more about ritual purity, though typically we may not think of in those terms. So, some object to wearing a mask because they are not persuaded it is effective or necessary to achieve physical purity or protection, and so in effect they dismiss masks as empty ritual by those who do wear them. And last, some either wear them or refuse to wear them for purposes of identity, that is, they want to demonstrate solidarity with certain groups that emphasize "the science" or that claim to prioritize "liberty" over science. Again, I offer this example merely to suggest that we, too, are caught up in debates about purity and the rules surrounding purity.

That being said, I think the bottom line is this: there's good news and bad news in this Gospel lesson for Christians today. The good news is that the early church, following Jesus, relaxed the Jewish ritual purity rules for Gentile Christians. The bad news, if we can call it that and again following Jesus, is that the early church also strengthened or at least emphasized the moral purity required of us. Yes, we can seek and find forgiveness for our faults and failures, but the expectations for our intentions and the actions that follow from those intentions are *very* high. And those high expectations can be traced directly to Jesus. Just go home and reread that list of evil things at the end of our Gospel lesson that Jesus said come from the human heart; if they don't cause us to pause, we're not hearing Jesus correctly. For whatever Jesus gave away on the ritual purity side of holiness, he doubled-down on the moral side. We are absolutely called, as are Jews, to be holy as God is holy, that is, to be fully dedicated in body, mind, and heart to God's purposes and glory—in our identities, our actions, and our intentions. That can be hard to hear and to implement in our lives, but we have to deal it if we're going to follow Jesus as our Lord. Amen.