

“The Heart of Religion”

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23; James 1:17-27

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. James 1:27

At the Salvation Army Miracle Kitchen last Sunday afternoon, everyone who was helping prepare food was required to wash his or her hands and to wear plastic gloves. That is the first thing they say to you – “go wash your hands and put plastic gloves on!” In addition, those with hair who didn’t already come wearing a baseball cap were required to wear a hair net. For the purposes of the Miracle Kitchen I was considered someone who had hair. George Hiza, on the other hand, was considered someone who did not have hair, even though he claims that if he wanted to, he could grow hair. His is elective baldness. Mine is mandatory! So I washed my hands, I put on the gloves and I wore the stupid hair net. What are you going to do?

Hair nets do not come up in today’s Gospel reading, but washing hands does. The folks at the Salvation Army aren’t the only ones who are rigid about washing hands. The Pharisees were also pretty insistent. They had noticed that the disciples had eaten without washing their hands. Today, of course, we know that washing your hands is a good thing, and washing the vegetables and the pots and pans is all good. But this wasn’t about cleanliness. It was about religious ritual. It was about purity laws whose purpose was not sanitary but ritualistic.

When I was growing up I remember my family driving by the other Presbyterian Church in the town of Huntington and we would see the members standing around outside, and some of them (gasp) were smoking. And I remember my parents making comments about these people. There was an attitude of disgust, and I remember getting the impression anyway, whether they actually said this or not I can’t remember, that those people were not real Christians, because if they were they wouldn’t be smoking. The objection to smoking in my church had nothing to do with the effects of tar and nicotine on the body. This was before the Surgeon General’s warning was posted on each pack of cigarettes. Rather, it was a purity issue. Christians, in the church where I grew up, did not smoke or drink, and although it wasn’t emphasized as strongly, dancing, card playing and going to the movies were also considered suspect.

That is what this passage in Mark is all about. The Pharisees complained to Jesus about his disciples not washing their hands not because they were concerned about germs. They were not. They didn’t even know about germs. They were concerned about purity. But Jesus had their number, didn’t he? He says to them: “Isaiah was right on the money when he prophesied about you hypocrites: “this people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me.” He calls them hypocrites. The Greek root from which we get our word hypocrite meant originally a stage actor, someone pretending to be someone they were not. Jesus was telling the Pharisees that they were just pretending to be religious.

Well, sometimes people call those of us in the church hypocrites. They’ll say something like, “I would go to church, but it’s full of hypocrites.” The classic answer to that is, “well, come anyway. There’s always room for one more.”

This year when we went for my week of study leave, the chaplain for the week was a man named Tony Campolo, a Baptist minister, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Eastern University in Pennsylvania, lecturer and author of a number of books. I didn’t think I was going to like Mr. Campolo partly because my mother used to rave about him, and I generally found that people she liked, I didn’t like, and vice versa. But I was surprised. He is much more evangelical than I am and therefore there were some parts of his messages that I tended to tune out a bit.

But both Diane and I were very impressed with his genuineness and sincerity, with his willingness to take on issues and to say things that many of his fellow evangelicals would have a problem with, not to mention that he is a very good communicator. His take on someone who claims that the church is full of hypocrites is to say, “come on down. You’ll feel right at home. These are your kind of people!” He said that one of his secular friends said to him one day, “You know Campolo, I know people who don’t even claim to believe in God, who aren’t religious at all, who do more to promote the cause of world peace and who live more responsibly in the world than you do.” Tony Campolo said to his friend, “well, I’m sure you’re right. I’m not what I could be. But just think how much worse I would be if I weren’t a Christian. And think how much better these friends of yours would be if they were!”

We like to beat up on the Pharisees because they were hypocrites and they put all of the emphasis upon ritual and so on. But the real truth is, we are all hypocrites. We all say more than we produce. We all fail to live up to our ideals as fully as we could. We all certainly fail to live up to the standards that Jesus spoke of. We all pretend to be Christians. We put the mask on.

The Pharisees were upset because Jesus’ disciples weren’t playing the part. They weren’t doing what religious people were supposed to do – wash their hands and perform the ritualistic cleansings that marked one as religious. But Jesus said that all of that was nothing but show. So what is the real stuff of religion? What is it that makes a person religious? What is the heart of religion? What does a religious person look like? Sometimes you can spot them. A priest with a collar, a nun in a habit, a Muslim woman in a burkha, a Sikh wearing a turban, an evangelical Christian, perhaps, carrying a Bible, someone bowing to offer prayer at a restaurant.

But Jesus seemed to indicate that you couldn’t count on outward signs. Some of the Pharisees, he said, loved to walk around in long robes and to be greeted in the marketplace and to say long prayers in public. But he said that when you prayed you should do it privately, that when you gave alms you should not let your right hand know what your left hand is doing, and that when you fast you should disguise the fact that you are fasting and avoid looking “dismal.” In other words, in most ways it should not be obvious.

I told once before how when we went to see our kids one time for one of our grandchildren’s birthdays, as the time for the party got closer it was my job to run to the grocery store for last minute items, which I did probably four or five times. The last time Diane went with me. I picked up a couple of bags of ice and Diane picked up some flowers and we laid these items on the conveyer belt. A very pleasant woman at the cash register couldn’t tell if we were together or not so asked me if it was just the ice that I was buying, and I said, “no, we’re together.” And then, as I am sometimes flippant, I said, “We’ve been together for 35 years.” (Now it is longer than that.) The woman said, “Well that’s great. My husband and I have been together for 32 years.” And then a short conversation ensued about what it takes to keep a marriage together. Then, suddenly, the woman turned to me and said: “You are a minister, aren’t you?” I was totally taken aback. I pride myself on my ability to camouflage my profession. I asked her how she knew. She said: “my spirit and your spirit.” I was very impressed. How did she know, I wondered. Was it the goofy, clueless look that ministers sometimes have? Or, God forbid, it wasn’t a pious look was it? I hope it wasn’t that.

Oliver Wendell Holmes said: “I might have entered the ministry if certain clergymen I knew had not looked and acted so much like undertakers.” Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series*, Matthew, Vol. 1, p. 120
 Tony Campolo has wonderful stories to tell, and one of them he told was about a friend, a Lutheran minister in Southern Indiana named Walter Wangrine. Walter pastored a small church in Southern Indiana. And he said there was a man in his church that he didn’t like. Tony Campolo says that none of us would have liked him either. He was singularly unattractive. He was hunch-backed. He had a disfigured face -- a lower lip that hung out about an inch -- and he smoked incessantly.

In addition, this old man never bathed and he smelled terrible. And whoever he sat next to in church, he always talked to them throughout the service. And on top of that, he never sat in the same place twice! And, worse than that, he always came late. So nobody knew where he was going to sit! Every Sunday, everybody waited for Arthur Forbes.

One Sunday, Arthur did not show up. Walter wasn't upset. But in the middle of the week the phone rang, and it was Arthur, and in a gruff voice he said, "Pastor, do you still make house calls? Cause if you do, visit me, I am sick." So Walter visited Arthur Forbes. He lived in a broken down shack on the side of the hill -- junk all over the yard, a broken refrigerator on the front porch. Walter went up, knocked on the door. The gruff voice of old Arthur Forbes invited him in. He stepped into this darkened room. The green, winter shades were pulled all the way down. The old black-and-white television set in the corner had the volume turned all the way up, and the picture was flip-flopping, and there was dirt and filth everywhere, and a stench of urine in the air, and there were dishes with rotted food on them, and piles of old magazines and newspapers covered with dirt. It was smelly, and musty, and dark. And there in the middle of the room, sitting on this stuffed chair, with most of the stuffing hanging out, illuminated only by the flickering television set, was old Arthur Forbes. Walter said, "I've come to bring you Holy Communion and to pray with you." The old man said, "Forget the Communion, just pray!" So he prayed.

And after that, Walter visited Arthur at least two or three times a week. Every time he visited, he did something -- like, cleaned up the place a little, mowed the grass, did the dishes, paid the bills. He did loving things. He did, Tony Campolo says, what Jesus would do if Jesus was in his place. One hot August day, he knocked on the door and the gruff voice invited him in, and when he stepped in, there was Arthur Forbes, sitting in that chair, naked. Walter said, "It was the most repulsive sight I'd seen in a long time, this bony man, with his hunch-back, and his yellow-colored skin, sitting there nude." The old man said, "I'm hot, so I took off my clothes." And then, "I want Holy Communion today." Walter said, "My hands trembled with anger as I gave him the bread and the wine."

The next day, when Walter stopped by there was no answer when he knocked on the door. When he pushed open the door, there was Arthur Forbes' naked body lying on the floor. He had had a stroke. Walter called the hospital. He called a friend. The friend came over. They got this dirty, filthy man up on his feet. Walter said, "With a sponge and soapy water I scrubbed his dirty body. I washed him in unspeakable places. And when I had cleansed him, and dressed him, I got him to the hospital." At the hospital Walter got him up to the room, tucked him into bed, gave him a glass of water and then said a prayer. And then before he left he did something spontaneously that surprised him -- he leaned over and kissed Arthur Forbes on the forehead. Then he went home and sat in his darkened study. A little while later the phone rang. The voice at the other end said, "Arthur Forbes is dead."

Walter said that when he heard that he started to cry, and he said that his crying turned into wailing. Walter said, "I hadn't cried when my own father died, and I was crying and I was wailing, and my wailing turned into screaming, and I cried, and I screamed, and I howled, and I realized that I loved Arthur Forbes! I loved him. He had seduced me into loving him, not by anything he did for me, but by allowing me to give to him what Jesus would give if Jesus was in my place."

James says religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress...." That is where it starts. That, it seems to me, is the heart of religion.

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