

The Relationship Of Inside And Outside: The Paradox Of Biblical Truth – Brian Hartley

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

I must have been about 8 or 9 years of age when I graduated to wearing a “big boy” tie. I can still remember my father standing behind me and walking me through the various steps required for tying off a proper knot. Ties were an important social symbol in my family and in our church. My mother had drilled into my head that entering the Lord’s house required wearing our Sunday best and exercising the very best decorum possible. But it was my father who always reminded me to consider it a privilege to wear a coat and tie—that every day he could dress up to go to work provided one a sense of privilege because it was a day he didn’t have to wear a pair of overalls and go barefoot. Rural poverty was still rife in the Ozarks in those days and I did my best to learn the lessons my parents taught me. To this day, I have never owned a pair of overalls and I can’t stand to have my bare feet exposed—no flip-flops or sandals for me! Those childhood customs of donning a coat and tie have been ameliorated a bit by my immersion in bourgeoisie culture, but it remains something of an ingrained habit when reaching into the closet first thing in the morning.

All of us here today have been deeply shaped by social customs and attitudes, not only about dress, but about how to see and how to relate to the world. Oftentimes, whenever we encounter others in our culture who have been shaped differently, a misunderstanding results which can precipitate conflict. This was certainly the case for the early church. A minority group which emerged out of first-century Judaism, Christians oftentimes found themselves at odds with both the culture and the sub-culture and struggled to carve out an identifiable niche for themselves. Today’s texts speak of these difficulties and provide us with insights about how faith and culture come into play. But they do even more than this. This morning’s scripture lessons remind us that for Christians, as the theologian, Gordon Lathrop, suggests, truth always comes in “twos” and that the truth about God and ourselves emerges through juxtaposition—two sometimes contradictory truths laid alongside one another.

For those early Christians, their authoritative text was centered in Torah, the first five books of the Bible. And today’s text, taken from Deuteronomy, introduces the homily that concludes the lengthy preamble to the main body of this fifth, and final, book (Robert Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 897). The history of this book is a fascinating one and is linked to the story of Israel as a book rediscovered during the tumultuous time of the kings. Because some viewed it as “revisionistic,” the author is keen here to create what we might call a strict-constructionist view of Mosaic teaching (Alter, 897). And, according to this view, the keeping of the law was absolutely necessary because it went to the heart of the people’s self-identity. In that ancient world in which, more often than not, “might made right,” Israel understood itself as the chosen people of God whose power and role were inextricably tied to its adherence to a set of just statutes and laws (Alter, 898). By doing so, Deuteronomy suggests, other nations proclaimed them both “wise” and “discerning.” So, we should not be surprised that, first and foremost, they are reminded to not forget this calling to adherence to the Law. Their entire *raison d’etre* was rooted in remembering and keeping Torah.

This provides some of the background for our understanding of the conflict which emerges between Jesus and the Pharisees in today's gospel lesson. At the heart of this story stands a concern rooted in the Deuteronomic law—to adhere to the commands made known in Mosaic precepts. By the time of Jesus, an entire corpus of oral tradition had grown up to interpret what this meant—no matter what the situation. We, today, would probably call this “case law,” a collection of rulings based on actual cases as they had developed over time. In Jesus' day, there was a great debate over this oral tradition that separated the Pharisees and the Sadducees. But, this story should not be separated from its larger gospel context. Remember that by the time this gospel is being written down, the first generation of Christians are beginning to die out and the self-identity of the movement as an extension of Judaism is beginning to be questioned. Mark's very plot line sustains this new reality, for this story serves as the prelude to three miracle narratives in which Jesus will extend grace to Gentiles—those considered to be outside the margins of “God's people.” As such, it sets up a kind of interpretive prism for understanding how the Kingdom of God will expand beyond the cultural boundaries expected by those who regularly interpreted the Law.

The practices which had sprung up around table fellowship were really an attempt to define the larger question of purity. The Pharisees had settled on an understanding of defilement that was rooted in a form of material purity. For them, purity came to be best demonstrated by the scrupulous observance of cultic ritual. These practices became a part of the oral law which, for them, was something of fence which was built to safeguard the people from infringement of the Mosaic code. *In actuality*, however, as the late Bill Lane points out, *it represented a tampering with the Law which resulted inevitably in distortion and ossification of the living Word of God*, (Mark, 248-249). Their attempts at building a fence had actually resulted in creating of the Law what Paul would later describe as a “dead letter,” a literalistic rendition and *reductio ad absurdum* which crushed the life out of both the law and those who attempted to practice it.

So it is that Jesus sets in radical opposition to this view of material purity a version of moral purity. As Lane claims, he does not alleviate the demand for purity, but rather sharpens it. The issue for Jesus is not some rigid form of “material uncleanness,” but sin itself. In building up this set of ritualistic practices, the Pharisees had forgotten the most important insight rendered at Sinai—that we are unable to rescue ourselves. We are, by nature, sinners and only God is pure. This different understanding would lie at the heart of the eventual split between Jews and Christians, all centered around the issue of table fellowship. In Galatians, one of the earliest written books of the New Testament, Paul even recounts something of this “food fight” in which he and Peter square off over the issue of purity when it comes to the place of Gentiles. Mark's gospel is simply reflecting something of that squabble which would play such a key role in Christian self-definition well after Jesus' ministry.

But this text has served twenty centuries later as a touchstone for a kind of antinomianism in which the preacher denigrates any kind of outward norm and blasts away at his or her favorite pet peeve. Tom Long, writing in the Christian Century, lists any number of these so-called “human traditions” that get affixed in the homilist's gun sights: *chancel-prancing liturgy, denominational headquarters, pipe organs, the pope, temperance, video screens in worship*. The preacher typically takes a rather simplistic reading of the text and goes trotting out with an impassioned call to return to a spiritual religion of the heart—divorced from any such external

regalia (“Living by the Word,” Christian Century, August 25, 2009, 20). This is what my grandfather would have called “easy pickin’s”—a convenient hermeneutic for playing to the preacher’s own proclivities and supposedly Spirit-directed harangue.

But, the problem is that everything we do involves some form of “human tradition”—from how we read the biblical text to our gathering at Table this morning. As Long suggests, *Wielding a scalpel to neatly divide what God commands from the ways we humans form our religious life is neither possible nor, in the final analysis, desirable*. No, what is at stake here is something much more serious. It is as Long describes it, *about keeping our hands ritually washed while being up to our elbows in evil*, or, to paraphrase Walker Percy, about getting an A-plus in ethics and flunking life. It occurs, most often, when religion serves as a convenient replacement for doing the commandments of love, mercy, and justice.

But how to counter this? Here, our reading from James offers some compelling advice: *let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger ... be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves* (1:19-22). This more integrative approach between the interior and the exterior lay at the heart of early Christian catechesis—what we would call teaching, or Christian discipleship. In his in-depth study of such practice, entitled Augustine and the Catechumenate, the late William Harmless outlines the careful ascetic disciplines required of early Christians. For instance, he says, during the Lenten season catechumenates were discouraged from bathing and encouraged to fast, pray, and meditate on scripture. Now while we might interpret this as support for poor hygiene, in reality it was a recognition by Augustine that the public baths were a place of entertainment and gossip. Bathing, in the late fourth century, was a public, not private, activity, a place for socializing. The church understood that sometimes, particularly when one was going through discipleship training, absenting one’s self from places of socialization was the better option. It would be like encouraging one to unplug from the grid for a period of time in order to more carefully attend to the voice of Jesus and the instruction of the church. Those early Christians understood that the shaping of one’s interior could not be separated from one’s external choices. This is not an out-and-out rejection of ritual. Rather, it is an understanding that all of life is ritual. The question for them, and for us, is which rituals shape us to be more like Christ.

Augustine and his contemporaries did not view the flesh, Harmless claims, as the enemy of the Spirit, as did some religious dualists of that era. Instead, they saw the body as something in need of mastery—of coming under the direction for which God had intended it. The flesh was not the problem, but simply the place where the real issues of the human heart surfaced. Christian catechesis, Christian discipleship, then, centered around rituals that would bring the body back into right relationship with one’s interiority (304). Sin results in us clinging to the wrong things or loving the good things God has made in the wrong way. The only way of addressing this is through the rooting out of slovenly and self-destructive habits. In order to do this, head, hand, and heart were all necessary.

This all brings us back around to where we began this morning’s sermon: the relationship between that which is external and that which is internal. It is all too easy to reduce Jesus’ teaching to a simplistic moral pablum which is self-serving and self-advancing. The idea that the heart, that one’s interior is all that matters is a serious misreading of the gospel. The text from

James stands, at least in one sense, as a counter-balance to this, when the writer proclaims that *religion that is pure and undefiled is to care for orphans and widows in their distress*. It would be equally easy to ride off into the sunset with this convenient totemistic approach as well—a kind of exterior ethic that excludes anything else.

But the hard truth this morning is that love of God and neighbor requires a learned discipline that shapes both head and heart. Today's texts stand in tension with one another to some extent, asking central questions of what it means to be a community shaped by the word. They remind us that being and doing are inseparable from one another and that a life of holiness is predicated upon a disciplined *askesis* which results in a change of heart that guides an internal moral ethic. As people of faith, we recognize both that we are called to a constant examination of the human heart and a disciplined way of life which shapes outward character. One without the other decapitates both the intention and the power of the gospel.

In his recent book, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*, Edward Baptist makes a similar contention regarding the ways we have chosen to talk about slavery and race within the larger context of American history. His particular contention is twofold: both that our conversations have taken place outside of the context of the emergence of America as an industrial power in the nineteenth century and that the actual narratives of former slaves, many of which were recorded and catalogued during the Depression, have largely been lost or ignored. By suppression of these stories and by excising the place of slavery from larger contexts, we have what he describes today as “half-truths.” These are not lies, mind you, but they consist of stunted narratives that prevent us from having a more complete understanding which, in turn, does not allow us to have as fruitful a discussion of what it means to be “American” as we might otherwise have.

In a similar vein this morning, I would maintain that part of our misunderstanding and misapplication of the gospel comes from our cherry-picking approach to the biblical text. Today's story from Mark is a classic example of this. Instead, we need to learn from the wisdom of the early Christians that there is a larger biblical canon, a larger biblical context, and a larger biblical understanding. What we do in our worship service counts because it can either teach or ignore this reality. When we stand and confess that Jesus was fully divine, we speak a half-truth. Yes, Jesus was fully divine. But, by participating in the Creed, we learn that this is only part of the story: Jesus was also fully human. And, as we have made our way these past six weeks through John's gospel, we have seen that Jesus is the Truth—with a capital T. But, that is only a half-truth. He is also the one who operates out of Grace. He is both Grace and Truth: not just one without the other. Truth, for Christians, as Gordon Lathrop maintains, always consists of juxtaposing one truth alongside another. What my father taught me so long ago when it came to dress was not a lie, but it was only a partial truth. Yes, to some extent, our choice of apparel does mark us out, does proclaim something of who we are. But what comes from within is equally important and equally true. We are never limited by or reduced to simply what we wear.

As we stand together at Table today, we are a people called to live within the uncomfortable boundaries of such a juxtaposed truth. It is a liminal space—a place in-between—that involves our willingness to embrace the paradox and difficulties of a life lived in conformity to the Gospel. It calls us to proclaim the truth of both, “Black lives matter,” and, “All lives matter.”

And it forces us to both aspire to the ideal while living in the painful difficulties of the real. Either without the other falls short of the full arc of the Gospel. May God grant to us both wisdom to discern such space and courage with which to inhabit it. Amen.