

Proper 17B 2015 Sermon

August 30, 2015 Lutheran/Episcopal Service in the Park

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

In our Gospel today, some Pharisees and scribes scold Jesus because some of Jesus' disciples did not ritually wash their hands before eating. Now there is no Biblical law commanding the washing of hands before eating; these scribes and Pharisees base their complaint on oral tradition.

Jesus, knowing that these scribes and Pharisees disregard the *spirit* of the Law while **insisting** on the observance of traditions which *some* Jews have established, says to them, "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." It's a sober reminder for all Christians who cherish our traditions (and Episcopalians and Lutherans certainly do!) to constantly be asking ourselves whether we hold to our traditions for the sake of **God** or our own comfort and familiarity. Do our traditions point us to God? Lead us to God? Unite us with God? If not, why do we "hold to them"?

A similar question might be posed regarding the way we use the Bible. Are we in danger of *worshipping* the **written** words of the Bible rather than being *transformed* by the **Living** Word coming to us *through* the Bible - and in many *other* ways?

Thomas Merton, the 20th Century Trappist monk who did much to bridge the religions of the East and the West, was fond of a saying attributed to the Buddha:

“My teaching is like the finger pointing to the moon... You look in the direction of my finger, and you can see the moon. If you take my finger to *be* the moon, you will never see the moon.” Both our religious **traditions** and the Bible are like fingers pointing to God; the whole point is God, not the fingers.

And if we just look around us at this beautiful spot, we can see that there are many, many *other* fingers that point to God, not just our Traditions and the Bible. As St. Paul wrote to the Romans: “Ever since the creation of the world [God’s] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.” (1:20) We are here today in the midst of God’s beautiful Creation – the trees, the grass, the gentle breeze and warm sun – countless fingers pointing to God!

Fr. Richard Rohr notes that two of the great Saints of the Christian Church – Anthony of the Desert (c. 252-356) and Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) – each “said there are **two** books of scripture. The *first* book of scripture is the natural world, which has existed since the Big Bang 14 billion years ago. The second book of scripture is the written Bible, which has only existed for about 2,000 years...”¹ And yet, at least since the time of the Protestant Reformation, I’m afraid that we in the Church have focused most of our attention on the *second* book of Scripture to the **neglect** of the first. Perhaps we are afraid that if we spend too much time experiencing God through Creation, we might be accused of Pantheism! But St. Francis of Assisi had no such fear. While he knew his Bible well – especially the teachings of Jesus – he spent more of his time learning from the *first* scripture: Creation.

In his *Canticle of the Creatures*, Francis wrote:

*Praised be You, my Lord, through all Your creatures,
especially through sir Brother Sun,
who brings the day; and You give light through him.
And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendor!
Of You, Most High, he bears the likeness.*

*Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars;
in the heavens You have made them bright, precious and beautiful.*

*Praised be you, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air,
and clouds and storms, and all the weather,
through which You give Your creatures sustenance.*

*...Praised be you, my Lord, through our sister Mother Earth,
who feeds us and rules us,
and produces various fruits with colored flowers and herbs.*

Francis had not forgotten God's **first** Scripture! Rather, he saw in *every part* of nature – including rocks – fingers pointing to God!

The present Pope chose the name “Francis” in part because he shares this creation spirituality (as witnessed by his recent encyclical on the environment); and I believe that it is in part *because* Pope Francis has restored interest in the **first** scripture, Creation, that he has captured the hearts of so many people around the world, just as Francis of Assisi once did. Too often over the past 500 years, I'm afraid, we Christians have focused **exclusively** on the *second* Scripture, the Bible, arguing endlessly about the interpretation of words, which in most instances has only served to divide us.

Yet the *second* Scripture speaks **clearly** of the *first* scripture – not just in the passage from Romans I mentioned earlier, but in many of the psalms and other places of the Bible. In the Book of Job, for instance, Job says:

“If you would learn more, ask the cattle,
Seek information from the birds of the air.
The creeping things of earth will give you lessons,
And the fishes of the sea will tell you all.
There is not a single creature that does not know
That everything is of God's making.” (Job 12:7-10)

If we pay attention to God's creation, Job says, all creatures will point us to God.

Brother Geoffrey Tristram, Superior of the Society of St. John the Evangelist, tells of a time a few years back when he went on a walk with a friend in the hills outside Boston. It was October in New England, and the trees were at their finest. Br. Tristram writes:

“As we walked up one of the small paths, we paused at the top and looked over towards the lake, and we were stopped in our tracks. There was the most beautiful sugar maple, ablaze in color – orange and yellow and gold. Each leaf was shimmering in the breeze, and dazzling in the near horizontal rays of the sun. The tree seemed to be on fire. We just stood there, fixed to the ground, and stared. ‘Wow!’ we finally said. ‘It's like Moses before the burning bush.’ We felt we were on holy ground.”²

Brother Tristram says he was immediately reminded of the poem titled “God's Grandeur,” written by the 19th-Century Jesuit priest Gerard Manley Hopkins. Some of you, I am sure, are familiar with the poem, and I hope that hearing it again only intensifies its meaning for you. And I hope that for **all** of us it might help expand our experience of nature, that we might know Creation – might know this **place**, with the gentle breeze and sun and shade and grass and trees – as a revelation of God. (Before I read it, let me clarify an archaic phrase Hopkins uses: to “reck [God's] rod” means to heed God's authority.)

God's Grandeur

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.*

Despite all the toil and hardship of this life, “nature is never spent; There lives the dearest freshness deep down things...” – the Spirit of God unfailingly alive in and through Creation!

Reflecting on that transformative experience of the sugar maple tree shining like Moses' burning bush, and wondering about the lesson it might have to teach him, Brother Geoffrey writes: “I believe God wants us to **practice** truly *seeing* every day. We can, if we desire it, *learn* to see and *expect* to see the presence of God each day, even in the most ordinary things. As we grow closer to God in prayer we begin to see as God sees... Amazingly, what **was** just *ordinary* **can** be transfigured with God's glory. The whole world **is** charged with the grandeur of God. If we ask God to open our eyes, that grandeur will flame out, like shining from shook foil.

“So how might we grow in our capacity to really see...? How can we develop our inner eye? ...There is a word in the Gospels of Matthew (Matt. 6:28) and Luke (Lk. 12:24) which Jesus uses about the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. He says, ‘consider’ them. The word ‘consider’ is a really strong one. It means, don’t just glance at them, but look, deeply, attentively, thoughtfully. Consider them, and you will see.

“It may be looking intensely at the leaf of a tree, or a feather... Don’t move on... keep looking at it. It’s charged – charged with the grandeur of God.

“Today, in this worship, we take very ordinary things – bread and wine – and we bless them; and recognize that they, too, in a very special way, are charged with the very body and blood of Christ. As you receive these sacraments pray that God will open your eyes to see that the *whole of creation* is a sacrament – that everything and everyone we meet is sacred and charged with God's glory.”³

Let us pray:

O Lord, open our eyes to your first Scripture, which surrounds us at this very moment, that we may truly see that the world is charged with the grandeur of God, and that all of creation points its finger to you.

Amen.

¹ From Richard Rohr's email meditation, "Aweism," Monday, January 19, 2015

² From the sermon, "Inscape," posted on October 28, 2012

<http://ssje.org/ssje/2012/10/28/inscape-br-geoffrey-tristram/>

³ *Ibid.*