

Life as a Pharisee
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
Mark 7:1-23 ~ August 29, 2021

Let us pray: Loving God, shed your light upon our path. Show us the way to live your love. Amen.

Striving to create the beloved community, the realm of God, is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. As we carefully fit each piece together, the image becomes clear, the end in sight. But invariably, it seems, we look up from our task one day and realize that there are a great many other pieces in the box we had not seen. To include these pieces, we cannot simply add them on at the edge; we must undo much if not all of it and begin afresh.

This can be true for comparably modest enterprises as well: creating a local church congregation, even composing our own lives as Christians with a sense of integrity and wholeness. We're getting it together, the picture is starting to emerge, and then a twist, a piece of news, or some inner realization, and the whole composition shifts in new light. We begin anew.

If you're on St. Columba's mailing list, you received an email from me this week. (If you didn't, please let me know right away so we can include you). In it, I spoke of worship and upcoming celebrations to gather together. Much of my attention was devoted to setting guidelines: guidelines to keep us safe in the time of COVID, protocols for staff – the importance of vaccinations, wearing masks, washing hands, quarantining, and all the rest. Rules to obey so we can live together in safety in community; rules then, born of compassion and love. I was doing for us what each of us is doing for our respective households, communities, organizations – setting and re-setting, calibrating, and adapting; charting a path through treacherous unfamiliar terrain.

As I considered which t's to cross and i's to dot, I took note of Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees in today's Gospel. The Pharisees are upset because Jesus is not following the rules. Following the rules is hard enough; it can be upsetting when others don't – if you know what I mean. For sure, the Pharisees are meticulous rule setters and rule followers, to the point of scrupulosity, but in fairness to them – and my heart goes out to them today – the rules were created so that people could be in a good and right relationship with God and with one another. Washing hands, washing utensils, avoiding certain foods were prescribed in Holy Scripture. Over time, cleanliness and purity codes may have gotten out of hand, but initially the intent was safety and holiness.

Jesus really blasts them: you hypocrites! You give lip service to God and community. But your heart is not in it; you don't really care about your neighbor. You've missed the point. You're only tracking the letter of the law. Stop fussing with external things that people use to separate and segregate; pay attention to what's inside of you – your desires and intentions; these are what matter.

This is the moment when Jesus busts in on them – or on us – and says, your vision is too small. You've got *these* puzzle pieces put together, working out fine for a handful of you, but you've left out all these others. You're going have to take the whole thing apart and try again.

Does Jesus not like COVID rules? I'd say that depends on how we use them. If your ears are tingling with thoughts that Jesus may be speaking about access – to affordable housing,

voting rights, racial justice, or health care, I think that's on the mark. This encounter is part of Jesus' larger agenda: he is intentionally calling out and dismantling the prevailing social order in favor of constructing a new one.

The Pharisees are part of a long tradition in the Judeo-Christian lineage (and parallels can be found in virtually every other religion). It is a tradition of purity and holiness, one that views the world as fallen, dirty, sinful, dangerous – in which true faith obligates one to set oneself apart. The word “Pharisee” comes from the Aramaic and means “separate ones.”

Jesus embodies an equally ancient tradition. This one says, every time people draw a circle around their community that creates us and them, inside and out, the love of God is going to draw a wider circle – one that includes all of us. You can apply this image and see it at work in every encounter Jesus has. Just look at the company he keeps. When the Pharisees reprimand Jesus for not washing his hands before supper, they find him surrounded in the company of lepers, prostitutes, widows, tax collectors, Romans, Gentiles, union workers, and the unruly rest. By his very presence, Jesus creates a wider circle.

Leviticus says, “Be holy, as God is holy.”

Jesus says, “Be merciful, as God is merciful.” I'm with Jesus.

So here's what I'd like to suggest we make of all of this: that living in the light of Christ means that we need to lift up our heads more often than not, and notice the parts or the people we've left out, left behind, or excluded. Perhaps we did not exclude with malice or forethought. We were simply busy doing the best we could with the pieces and vision we had at the time. Similarly, we might consider the circles we think we inhabit, and ask God to open the edges, the borders, to help us see how we might step out, and inhabit a wider circle.

Jesus is pretty hard on the Pharisees; he does not hold back. I wasn't there so I don't know; maybe that's what he needed to do to get their attention. But here's what I've observed: there is a pattern or rhythm to this life of creating beloved community. There are seasons when we pull in close, narrow the focus, and tighten the rules; I just wrote COVID guidelines. Followed by seasons when we're called to take in the whole expanse, to be porous, open; let go the old construct. I invite you to wonder, this week: is God inviting you to open up some border in your life? Or to consider anew some neglected piece – a relationship, a dream?

Before I wrap up, let's wonder, shall we, what this encounter meant for those particular Pharisees. The text doesn't say, so we're at liberty to write our own endings. I see three possible responses. One says, Jesus is a nut. He and his lot are on the fast path to hell. I'm going to wash up, say my prayers, and get back to the temple. A second says, Jesus is a nut – and he's dangerous; he's going to upset the whole system; we've got to take him down. We know this response is real, because that's what they did. The third went away troubled, shaken. They had met the truth and they saw that the truth was going to dissemble much of what they held dear and on which they relied – was going to rearrange their relationships, status, confidence, maybe even their perceived place in the Kingdom of God.

My heart goes out to these last because we've all been there, every one of us. It is hard when we devote a chapter of our lives, our best selves, toward a desired goal, and come to find that it's not going to work out that way, that there were other pieces we did not have, other forces we could neither foresee nor control. We were doing the best we could, but the picture we had in mind for the world and our place in it is overtaken by another.

As with you, my heart is facing toward Afghanistan these days; my heart is breaking with the horror and sadness, this is a tragic end in so many ways. Members of St. Columba's Refugee Response Ministry are in conversation with our bishop, and considering ways we can help those arriving in this country. I've also been in conversation with a couple of you – and I imagine there are others – who took part in some direct way in America's presence in Afghanistan – through diplomatic relations, or setting policy, securing resources, serving in the armed forces. You gave it your all; some sacrificed all. *Silence*. This is not the end anyone desired, not the good for which anyone hoped or prayed or worked. I am sorry. We are all sorry.

The losses are not the same for everybody; they never are. I apologize if this sounds glib, but when it comes to creating the beloved community, in the end this will be a gift from God; our call is to create and build, and rebuild and recreate, as we can with the pieces and the heart that we have.

Here's an ironic kicker: in the very next passage after ours, Jesus meets a woman from Syrophenicia and denies her bread, withholds his mercy because she's an outsider – until she calls him out and insists. Apparently, that day Jesus needed her to wake him up and widen his circle! I sure am glad we have one another and we're all in this together! Beloved, "Be merciful, as God is merciful."