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Song of Solomon 2: 8 – 13  
James 1: 17 – 27

Ps. 45: 1 – 2, 6 – 9  
Mark 7: 1 – 8, 14 – 15, 21 – 23

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Sometimes, when I'm on a road trip, I'll use Google Maps even when I have traveled the route over and over again and know the way. I use it to keep track of how much farther I have to go, or what the traffic looks like ahead. The nice woman's voice is always trying to guide me to take interstate routes and bypasses. I happen to prefer the journey on back roads and through towns, so I frequently - and repeatedly - ignore her suggestions. Fortunately, she remains calm and never seems to get frustrated with me for not taking her advice. And as I get to where I'm going, the nice woman says something like, "In one thousand feet, turn right onto Oakfield Drive. Your destination will be on the left. (pause) You have arrived at your destination."

You have arrived at your destination. That is one way of looking at what's going on in today's Gospel. We're back in the Gospel of Mark, picking up from where we left off six weeks ago. Jesus is in the region of Gennesaret, on the northwest coastline of the Sea of Galilee. People have been flocking to him so that he can heal them or their loved ones, or feed them. Or so that they can hear what he has to say. But they are not the only ones who have been following Jesus. Some scribes and Pharisees have come all the way from Jerusalem to watch Jesus and hear what he has to say.

As they are observing Jesus and his interactions with his disciples, the scribes and Pharisees are horrified to see that Jesus doesn't enforce the strict rituals for cleanliness when they eat. Mark, who's writing this Gospel for a non-Jewish audience, perhaps thirty years after Jesus' death and resurrection, takes the time to explain to his listeners and readers the particular rituals in question. They are part of a highly developed system of purity regulations. And while the initial tradition had begun sincerely enough, over centuries, the system had grown exceedingly rigid. Rigid to the point that everything the Pharisees, scribes and other observant Jews do hangs on concerns over whether they will be breaking one of the 613 laws or not. Because perhaps if one part of the tradition is broken, then perhaps the whole tradition will break down. And if the whole tradition breaks down, then perhaps the faith will break down and die out. Which all puts exceedingly high pressure on the need to observe the traditions.

It's also important to note that these washing rituals are in place, not for any hygienic reasons – the world doesn't yet know anything about germs and bacteria – but rather because they are ways in which the Jewish people live differently from the people around them. They are part of the boundaries, the behaviors, that set "God's chosen people" apart from everyone else.

The issue is, though, as Jesus quickly points out to the scribes and Pharisees, that these "traditions of the elders" are human-created rules, not ones that are divinely ordained. In other words, they are simply habits. Habits which have become part of the tradition. And in truth, the only people who have the time and the financial resources to follow all these traditional 'rules' are the religious elite, not the everyday laborer or shepherd or fisherman.

Ostensibly, following such purity laws, or *halakha* as they are known in Hebrew, is a way of expressing one's relationship with God. But if there is nothing behind the rote action, if it is more about getting a check in the block or sustaining a system, then what does that say about the relationship with God? Instead of pointing to the holiness of God, 'ritual purity' becomes a means of excluding people

considered “unclean.” It becomes a way of defining who’s in and who’s out. In not enforcing these rituals with his followers, Jesus effectively erases these distinctions.

In fact, the very next thing that Jesus will do after this altercation is to go to the Gentile region of Tyre and heal the daughter of a Syrophenician woman. It doesn’t get much more on the ‘who’s out’ side of things than to be a Gentile girl-child with unclean spirits [four strikes against her!] So, in both word and action, Jesus completely ignores and actively dismantles the distinctions of ritual purity as a measure of spiritual status.

After putting these rituals in their place, Jesus then gets to the heart of the matter. Literally and figuratively. It’s what’s in the heart, and therefore the actions, words and thoughts that originate there, that matter. Jesus presents the Pharisees and scribes with another understanding of what it means to be faithful, to be in a right relationship with God.

Clarence Jordan, author of the *Cotton Patch Gospels* and founder of the Koinonia Community near Americus, Georgia had a very practical way of saying the same thing. Jordan often spoke of how inward character was the foundation of “Kingdom righteousness.” Like Jesus, Jordan maintained that the *way* a person did a thing and *why* he or she did it were every bit as important as *what* the person did. Intent, or attitude, what comes from the heart, is of ultimate importance.

To illustrate his point, Clarence Jordan would ask the folks at Koinonia whether chaining a vicious dog to a tree so that it would not bite anyone meant that it was a “good” dog? No, he would say, answering his own question. Because the dog’s “goodness” was in direct proportion to the length and strength of the dog’s chain. If, however, the dog was tamed and made gentle, then the need for a chain would be superfluous. The *externals* would not be needed if the *internals* were right.

And that is what Jesus is trying to get across to the Pharisees and scribes: the externals – the actions – should naturally flow out of rightly-oriented internals. For Jesus and for the people around him, the heart is the center of the emotions. The heart is the source of wisdom, understanding and discernment. It is the place out of which decisions are made. It is the soil in which commitment is rooted. And, for Jesus, the heart is the inner umbilical cord, the lifeline, to the spiritual realm. It can be the entry point for joy, peace, love, and courage, *or* for malice, pride, evil, and hate. The heart can be pure as new fallen snow or as tainted as a slag pond at a strip mine – or more likely, somewhere in between. Externals, Jesus says, like what you eat or don’t eat, whether you wash or you don’t wash, are worse than useless unless the heart is in the right place.

We don’t get how radical and revolutionary what Jesus is saying is. Jesus is completely redefining purity for Jews. So much of Jesus’ culture is defined by the traditional understanding of purity (following the law) and the sharp social boundaries that they create and delineate. But, Jesus says, purity is not about observing laws that separate someone from who or what is deemed unclean. Jesus is saying that it isn’t what’s outside a person that can contaminate, it’s what inside a person’s heart. Jesus is saying that religious rituals and traditions only have value to the extent that they help people serve God. So, rather than annulling the idea of traditions and rituals, Jesus is restoring a far deeper meaning to them.

In between the parts of the Gospel that we hear in today’s passage, there’s an interesting little thing going on. Jesus criticizes the Pharisees and scribes for playing fast and loose with the Word of God when it comes to taking care of one’s aging parents. There is a tradition called *Corban* which allows

someone to say that their wealth is a gift to God and in doing so, they can completely ignore the commandment of honoring one's father and mother. But then, Mark explains that Jesus is declaring all food clean. So, is Jesus playing fast and loose with the Word of God as well? British author and bishop, N. T. Wright says Yes. And No. "Yes," because the Bible lists a lot of things – like pork and shellfish – that are not to be eaten because they are unclean, and Mark seems to think that Jesus is saying that this doesn't apply anymore. But "No" because Jesus' basic point is that purity laws, including all the ones about food, don't actually get to the real human problem, and that that is what the Kingdom of God addresses.

Behind all this, Wright says, is the strong sense, already here in Jesus and worked out in the early church, that what has happened in Jesus has brought all of the Hebrew Scriptures, the whole covenant with Israel, to a new completion, a new fulfillment. The Scriptures, Wright says, speak of purity, and set up codes as signposts to it. Jesus offers the reality of it. When you arrive at your destination, Wright concludes, you no longer need the signposts, not because they are worthless but precisely because they have been correct. You have reached your destination. So, in the eyes of the Christian faith, we, the people of God, have arrived at our destination, Jesus Christ.

It would be ever so much easier to follow any number of ritual practices than to transform our hearts, but that is not what it means to be pure, Jesus says. If, on the other hand, we engage in religious practices that we allow to act like water over time on rock, gently sculpting and transforming our lives, our hearts, our beliefs as God would have them shaped, and if we engage in religious practices that bring forth love, compassion, generosity, kindness, steadfastness, faith, purity, and joy, then perhaps we are in the place where Jesus means for us to be.

Let us pray. Create in us clean hearts, O God, and renew within us a right spirit. Amen.

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