



THE CENTRAL PULPIT

CENTRAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH | ATLANTA, GEORGIA

THE FAMILY TALK

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 22-23

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It did not happen often, but when it did, I would cringe. I would hear my dad's booming voice calling us in from something like the "the Neighborhood World Series of Kickball" with the cryptic two word code: "family talk." My older brother, Dale, and I would glare at each other, each absolutely convinced that the other was to blame for this family "talk." The meeting never lasted long and my father was the only one talking. At the meeting's end, Dale and I would leave with a list of changes in behavior that dad expected to see from us, and see soon.

In chapter 7 of Mark's Gospel, the Pharisees and scribes come from Jerusalem to have a "family talk" with Jesus. They have got some things to discuss with Jesus about his chosen children, his disciples. They intend to talk and for him to listen.

In a sense, chapter 7 of Mark is just one long "family talk" or some might call it a family squabble. And you know how messy and awkward they can be – the long silences, the sudden stabs, the faux civility. Who wants to sit down right in the middle of a family squabble? So, more than a few Bible readers breeze right by Mark 7, because it feels so messy and often so petty. Who wants to get in the middle of a family squabble about who's not washing their hands before eating?

A quick look at Jewish history shows that these religious leaders arrive with no trivial concern. "The Mishnah will later report that a rabbi who challenged a ruling of the sages on cleanness of hands, Eliezer b. Hanokh, was excommunicated (m. 'Ed. 5:6), and the revered rabbi Akiba ate nothing while imprisoned rather than renounce the ritual washing prescribed by tradition" (Boring, *ark*, 199).

It would seem, then, that these esteemed leaders from Jerusalem have a heartfelt passion for hygiene. But, when you read between the lines, this conversation is about much more than hygiene, about much more than tradition. Something far more fundamental to the family is at stake than clean hands. Joel Marcus argues: "Although handwashing was not universal . . . it was widespread and was probably a 'boundary marker' by which Jews both identified themselves and were identified by outsiders as being set apart from neighbors" (Marcus, *Mark*, 441).

The issue here is less about hygiene, you see, than who belongs in this family and who does not. And, in this instance, the NRSV translation does not help us as much as it could. In verses 2 and 5, the NRSV translates a key phrase in effect that the disciples were “eating” with unclean hands. In Mark’s Greek, though, he makes the point in both cases to say that they were not only eating with unclean hands, they were “eating **bread**.” As Brian Blount argues: “For Mark . . . bread is always associated with . . . boundary breaking. . . . Throughout the Gospel, broken and eaten bread symbolizes the openness of God’s imminent reign to all people” (*Preaching Mark in Two Voices*, 120-121).

Now, unlike the family talk of my childhood, Jesus can be silent just so long. He has something to say to his aunts and uncles and cousins after he has heard his fill from them. They remind Jesus who belongs in the family by using the family hygiene code and Jesus reminds them that cleanliness before God is not an exterior issue. No amount of hand washing will make the human heart clean. It is the worst form of hypocrisy, says Jesus, to honor God with our lips and worship practices (in this case, with ritual washing before meals and abstaining from unclean foods), when the heart is far from God. Lovely and inspirational worship while neglecting basic justice is not what warms the heart of God.

In the book, *Dwelling Place*, Erskine Clarke tells the true story of Presbyterian minister and plantation patriarch, Charles Colcock Jones, whose family owned more than 100 slaves. Through Jones, we learn about his son-in-law, Robert Mallard, another slave holder, who happened to be pastor of Central Presbyterian Church at the beginning of the Civil War.

With faithful regularity, Jones, a slave master, entered the slave colonies each week to preach the Gospel. “A lone candle and the fire from a clay hearth lit each dwelling,” writes Dr. Clarke, “The sick lay on crude beds whose mattresses were made of the gray moss from the surrounding swamps. Standing beside these beds, with the shadows and light dancing around him, Charles reminded the sick of the gracious promises of the Gospel, asked them if they put their trust in Jesus, and offered a prayer for their health and salvation” (147). To his credit, Jones went where other slave owners avoided.

Sadly, though, despite his benevolent impulses, he could never bring himself to release his slaves or preach against the horror of enslaving fellow human beings. Though always washing his hands, Jones contributes to the building even higher the wall of human oppression. He was never quite able to see that preaching and worship are important, but preaching and worship that do not challenge injustice and establish God’s just reign grieves the heart of God.

In his part of “the family talk,” Jesus insists that God’s family includes *those people, common folks, Jews AND Gentiles*, those who wash their hands and those who always forget, all whose hearts are blemished and are cleansed only by the grace of God. Mark puts an exclamation point on this “family talk” when toward the end of chapter 7 a *common, no-name, no count, Gentile woman*, reminds Jesus “Sir, even the household dog eats the children’s bread crumbs.” And, as chapter 8 begins, Jesus gives more than crumbs of bread to a sea of hungry Gentiles.

Maybe it is time for the Presbyterian Church, USA, to worry less about clean hands and to engage in a new “family talk”? What would it be like for our denomination to spend less time worried less about *them*. You know who *they* are – *they* don’t think like us, *they* don’t worship like us, *they* don’t believe like us, *they* don’t love like us. What if we worried less about keeping *them* out and more about following the One who breaks bread and welcomes *them* into the family of God?

A few years back, a Presbyterian elder from Marin County, California, stood in this pulpit one Sunday afternoon. In addition to being a popular author, she is a recovering cocaine and alcohol addict. In her book, *Operating Instructions*, Anne Lamott tells about the first year of recovery.

When Sam was six days old, I took him to my little church in Marin City, the church where I’ve been hanging out for four years now. . . . I got in the habit of stopping by the church on Sundays but staying in the back, in this tense, lurky way, and leaving before the service was over because I didn’t want people to touch me, or hug

me, or try to make me feel better about myself. After I got sober and started to feel okay about myself, I could stay to the end and get hugged. . . . Anyway, the first Sunday after Sam's birth, I kind of limped in . . . and everyone was staring joyfully and almost brokenheartedly at us because they loved us so much. I walked, like a ship about to go down, to a seat in the back. But the pastor said, Whoa, whoa, not so fast – you come up here and introduce him to his new family. So I limped up to the little communion table in the front of the half circle of folding chairs where we sit, and I turned to face everyone. The pain and joy were just overwhelming. I tried to stammer, "This is my son," but my lip was trembling, my whole face was trembling, and everyone was crying. When I'd first started coming to the church, I couldn't even stand up for half the songs because I'd be so sick from cocaine and alcohol that my head would be spinning, but these people were so confused that they'd thought I was a child of God" (Operating Instructions, 26-28).

What if our family talks were less about who's been washing their hands and more about how we notice and welcome in the Annes of the world who are hanging around just outside and barely inside Central? What if we found ways to hold them steady until they did not need us to tell them that they are treasured, cherished, children of God?

What if we had family talks not about how to keep out, but how to celebrate the ministry of our L,G,B,T sisters and brothers until the day that those who fear their participation in the church finally come inside to join the celebration?

What if we then took our family talk to the halls of power? In chapters 6 and 8 of Mark's Gospel, Jesus refuses to accept the disciples' calculus that there is not enough bread to go around. He employs the God's calculus where everyone is entitled not to all they want but to enough. What if in our new family talk, we insisted not that our country adopt a Democratic or Republican health care plan, but that any plan adopted would not begin where the disciples leave off – we don't have enough to go around? Throughout Mark, Jesus makes it clear that when it comes to healing and hope, in God's divine calculus, there is enough to go around.

What if our new family talk refreshed our common memory that on the cross God busted down the door of division, the door keeping some in and some out of the family? What if we did not waste one more minute trying to repair a door that God demolished? What if we got up from these pews to take the family talk to the streets, until every living soul knows that they are forgiven and loved and welcome in the great family of God?

What if?

AMEN