

**Sermon - 9/2/18**  
**Mark 7: 1-8**  
**15th Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Davidson College Presbyterian Church - Davidson, NC**  
**Larry Lyon**

From a world that I believe has become too angry, too impatient, too divided, too unforgiving, too ungracious, even too rude, and from people who seem quite intentional on just plain freaking out, at times I seek to escape.

And one of the ways I do is to return to the gospels. To return to Jesus, you might say.

I kind of think Jesus looked around at the people, at the world, of his day, and maybe, just maybe, experienced similar frustrations. So he chose to speak up. He chose to speak truth, he chose to question. He chose to offer another way of doing life itself. And he chose to love, to love even those who others had no interest, **zero** interest, in loving.

And so in Mark 7, here we go again. There goes Jesus, again.

Let me recap.

Jesus had just recently walked on water, according to the account in Mark 6. He had even gotten the harsh wind to stop. He had calmed the storm. The people were impressed, understandably. They kept bringing to him the sick and the ill, and Jesus was offering healing to all. This was really turning into quite the first century show.

And yet the religious people, the Pharisees, the scribes, they **still** found a reason to complain. They found a reason to declare that this Jesus and his people were not following the proper procedures and polices. They found a reason **to freak out**.

The issue was some had forgotten to wash their hands before eating. Classic.

So they took Jesus aside, probably took him to the back room, cornered him, and said, look, **you thirty something whippersnapper**, why do your people eat with dirty hands? Don't they know our traditions? Don't they know the rule book? This is the point at which I can easily imagine three or four or even five fellows pulling out their books of laws and shaking them in the face of Jesus.

Jesus did not buy into their all too human drama.

Instead, he looked at them, square in the eye, and offered, "yep, Isaiah was right about you **boys**, he was so right, when he said your honor God with your words, but not with your actions, your hearts. What you do is in vain. You have bought into the world's ways."

Specifically, "you abandon the commandment of God and hold to human **tradition**."

(Pause)

Let me be clear.

Holding to human tradition is not an issue that only belongs to scribes, to Pharisees, to men wearing gaudy robes two thousand years ago.

The great irony is very few institutions hold on to tradition more tightly than the **church of Jesus Christ**, whatever form it may take, be it Catholic, Methodist, Episcopalians, or yes, Presbyterian. Just ask Pope Francis, who is back in hot water at the Vatican because he dares to be different and, in my mind, actually points to Jesus and his teachings.

Even all of these non denominational churches, springing up everywhere with their welcome flags, so proud of being new and exciting and shed of traditions, I dare say, check back in 50 years, when they, too, well, will have somebody saying, “we never did it **that way** back in 2020.”

Human beings are human beings. **This is what human beings do.** We like to find our comfort zones, our favorite of three Sunday morning worship services, our favorite pew, hunker down, and go about preserving life as we prefer it. In my first church, I was told, when we do something **once**, it is a **tradition**. It turned out to be true.

Flash back to last Sunday, when the executive presbyter of the Jresbytery of Charlotte, Jan Edmisten, delivered a wonderful sermon and reminded us that this church is not about us, or our pastors, or the PCUSA. . This church “is about the message of Jesus and how you can share that in the world,” she said. She even added this church “exists to show Davidson (and I would add Huntersville, Cornelius, Mooresville, this area) what love look likes in the world, to the glory of God.”

It is not about pleasing each other, or pleasing ourselves, or having a good enough stewardship campaign to keep the air conditioning on and the carpets clean from all of our coffee drinkers.

Oh. Really? You mean this is not about keeping our hands clean? This is not about insuring our pews stay full with people who look like us and act like us and think like us?

Last week I wanted to stand up and shout alleluia, Jan, preach it Jan, or at least, “amen, Rev. Dr. Edmiston.”

Except I could not. I am Presbyterian. I have six, or is it actually 7, decades of Presbyterianism behind me. Presbyterians don’t shout alleluia, Larry. Come on. You can’t do that. And so I didn’t.

(Pause)

Presbyterians, too, are slow to put up things like screens in sanctuaries. Young people everywhere may be learning by video these days, but we are going to expect them to come In here and sit still for 20 minutes while the preacher rambles on. Attention spans are getting shorter by the day, by the minute, but in our church world, Presbyterian sermons are going to last as long as they ever have. We love our children, we say, but we especially love them when they act like miniature adults.

And please don’t talk about removing pews from sanctuaries and replacing them with padded movable chairs, making spaces more multi functional or introducing useful change, or bringing in guitars and basses and even percussions, to our worship services. We tend to be traditional. We wish to be traditional until the day we die, and then it will become somebody else’s issue.

At the 9:45 service I will show a movie clip. It is of the song “Tradition” from the musical “Fiddler on the Roof”, a movie I saw in 1968, 50 years ago, in Radio City Music Hall in New York. In it the lead character, Tevye, while singing of tradition, tradition, says:

“We have traditions for everything.....

“How to sleep....how to eat....how to work....how to wear clothes....and we **always wear a little prayer shawl that shows our constant devotion to God.**”

“You may ask how did this tradition get this started? “

I’ll tell you, I don’t know.....

But because of our traditions, every one of us knows who he is, and what God expects him to do...”

(Pause)

When Jesus came along, he forgot to mention the importance of us all wearing prayer shawls.

Instead, he gave us a different way. He gave us a new commandment. He told us to love God, and to love neighbor, with all of our heart, with all of our mind, with all of our soul.

He said what matters is not appearances, but love. What matters is not policy and procedure, but love. What matters is not tradition, but love.

He even gathered his disciples around the table, on the night before he died, and he said, just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you my disciples **if** you have love for one another.”

Apparently he forgot the part about the prayer shawls. Or maybe he remembered, and he said, you know what, I am done with that. Let’s talk about love instead. Let’s talk instead about places in the heart.

Which brings me to one of my all time favorite movies, one called “Places in the Heart,” from 1984, starring Sally Field and Danny Glover and John Malkovich. Sally Field won the Oscar for her role. At the 945 service, I will show a clip from it, too.

It is from the end of the movie. The movie began with a scene at a Sunday dinner table, while the town sheriff is saying the blessing over the Sunday meal. You hear gunshots over his prayer, and eventually the sheriff is called downtown to handle a situation in which a young black man, Wiley, is drunk and randomly shooting a pistol. The sheriff and Wiley clearly know each other, and Wiley acknowledges he liquor bottle into the sky and shoots at it, and then drunkenly turns toward the sheriff, and accidentally pulls the trigger, shooting the sheriff dead. The movie then is about Sally Field’s struggle to keep her family moving forward after this tragedy.

The final scene shows people receiving the Lord’s Supper, in a little church, deep in the south, people passing the bread and the cup, one to the other, while the preacher reads the love passage from Corinthians. The choir then sings “In the Garden.” As communion is passed, suddenly you see people who had struggled with each other, joining together. At the very end, you even see the young black man, receiving the bread and the cup from the sheriff who Wiley had shot dead.

(pause)

**Love, in the end, will win.**

I **believe** that.

In fact, In this world gone a bit crazy, it is what keeps me going, day after day.

Thank you, Jesus.

Amen.