

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, September 2, 2018)

Text: **Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23** (*The Voice*)

Then the Pharisees returned to talk with Jesus, and with them came some of the scribes and scholars from Jerusalem.

Scribes and Scholars (seeing the disciples eating): Your disciples are eating bread with defiled, unwashed hands.

Now you need to know that the Pharisees, and all Jews for that matter, held the tradition of their ancestors that hands must be washed before eating to avoid being ritually unclean. Likewise, they washed when they returned from the market and followed similar purity teachings as well, from the washing of their food to the washing of their bowls, cups, and kettles.

Scribes and Pharisees: Why don't Your disciples follow the traditions passed down to us? Why do they eat their bread with defiled hands?

Jesus: Isaiah prophesied wisely about your religious pretensions when he wrote,

These people honor Me with words off their lips; meanwhile their hearts are far from Me. Their worship is empty, void of true devotion. They teach a human commandment, memorized and practiced by rote.

When you cling blindly to your own traditions [such as washing utensils and cups], you completely miss God's command.

Listen, all of you, to this teaching. I want you to understand. There is nothing outside someone that can corrupt him. Only the things that come out of a person can corrupt him.

Text: **James 1:17-27** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Make no mistake about this, my dear sisters and brothers: every worthwhile gift, every genuine benefit comes from above, descending from the Creator of the heavenly luminaries, who cannot change and is never in shadow. God willingly gave birth to us with a word spoken in truth, so that we may be, as it were, the firstfruits of God's creatures.

Remember this, my dear sisters and brothers: be quick to listen, but slow to speak and slow to anger; for God's justice is never served by our anger. So do away with all your filth and the last vestiges of wickedness in you. Humbly welcome the word which has been planted in you, because it has power to save you.

But act on this word—because if all you do is listen to it, you're deceiving yourselves. Those who listen to God's word but don't put it into practice are like those who look into mirrors at their own faces; they look at themselves, then go off and promptly forget what they looked like. But those who look steadily at the perfect law of freedom and make it their habit—not listening and then forgetting, but actively putting it into practice—will be blessed in all that they do.

If those who don't control their tongues imagine that they are devout, they're deceiving themselves and their worship is pointless. Pure, unspoiled religion, in the eyes of our Abba God, is this: coming to the aid of widows and orphans when they are in need, and keeping oneself uncontaminated by this world.

Pastor's Reflections: "Love Like That"

Please pray with me...

Generous giver of life, in this moment we pause from our hurrying, we rest from our scheduling, and we hold still our anxious minds. For in your calming presence, and open to your Spirit, we seek another way of being, another way of doing. Help us to simply be people who in our stumbling humanity, mirror your love and goodness with joy, purpose, and passion. Amen.

In his introduction to the letter from James we have before us today, *The Message* interpreter Eugene Peterson puts it right out there when it comes to the way we Christians walk the walk and talk the talk.

"When Christian believers gather in churches," he writes, "everything that can go wrong sooner or later does. Outsiders, on observing this, conclude that there is nothing to the religion business except, perhaps, business – and dishonest business at that. Insiders see it differently. Just as a hospital collects the sick under one roof and labels them as such, the church collects sinners. Many of the people outside the hospital are every bit as sick as the ones inside, but their illnesses are either undiagnosed or disguised. It's similar with sinners outside the church.

"So Christian churches are not," he writes, "as a rule, model communities of good behavior. They are, rather, places where human misbehavior is brought out in the open, faced, and dealt with."

At least that's how we hope a Christian church behaves. With the news headlines blaring daily with reports of how the Catholic church has handled the grave crises of sexual abuse and clerical coverup, each of us has had to wrestle with the way in which Christians everywhere are perceived and grieve the horrific way in which those who should be the healers and the bringers of good news are too often the perpetrators and the cover-uppers who hand us decidedly bad news on an all too often regular basis.

And don't think we protestants get off the hook in any way. No sirree. One of my dearest friends now living in Virginia, who was actually a big part of me coming to California and finding my way to the United Church of Christ is dealing daily with the crisis of sexual abuse among clergy and others within the Mennonite church that I grew up in.

And I can tell you that, while chairing the Church and Ministry Committee of the UCC we had plenty of our own challenges within our association and conference and worked hard to put in place methods and procedures of screening clerical candidates and working to keep our children and everyone safe within our churches. I know Rev. Lorraine, who took my place as the chair on that committee continues that work and has gone even further with it. We can be very thankful to have an association and a conference that takes the safety and well-being of all God's children seriously.

We can't know for sure what the "twelve tribes of the diaspora" that James is writing to in this letter were dealing with specifically, but we can gather that they were going through many of the same trials and tribulations and challenges we humans continue to go through on a daily basis.

They obviously had some hotheads among them, as James cautions them to be slow to anger, and they also had a few people who lashed out without thinking first of how their words could injure or abuse. As I told the LEAP of Faithers on Wednesday night, that put me in mind of the old adage, "be sure brain is in gear before engaging mouth." This was an important enough point for James to reiterate it in another way as "controlling the tongue."

But like every good parent and teacher knows, just making the rules and using a lot of "don'ts" doesn't always or even usually lead to good behavior or righteous living. We all must understand the WHY of the rules and take in the benefit of living by the law in order to truly ingest it and make it part of our lives.

I think that's what Jesus is trying to give to us in our gospel passage from Mark today as he chides the Scribes and Scholars and Pharisees (good acting, by the way) for only giving lip service to God and not their full hearts and souls. "They teach a human commandment, memorized and practiced by rote," he says.

And so I say: you can live by the letter of the law, but unless you live by the letter of love with God living within you and guiding you you're really not achieving anything of worth in furthering God's kin-dom here on earth. Rather, you're behaving in exactly the style James is speaking to in his letter when he says, "those who listen to God's word but don't put it into practice are like those who look into mirrors at their own faces; they look at themselves, then go off and promptly forget what they looked like." Not having God as every part of our lives and guiding every thought and action, we simply go through the motions, perhaps living what some would think is a Godly life from the outside, but full of deceit and darkness inside.

But there's a way through, a way to make sure we're doing what we say in living as the children of light God knows we are. And that is through service and faithfulness. As James writes, "to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

Which is a great lead in to the second part of our story for today, "Shoebox Sam." Let's see if Sam has a greater influence on the children by what he says or by what he does. . . . (At this point, Pastor Donald read the second part of a story he had begun with the children – "Shoebox Sam" written by Mary Brigid Barrett, and illustrated by Frank Morrison.)

After the story:

"Divine knowledge is always rooted in the details of ordinary life," purports Rabbi Rami Shapiro. "The aim of all knowledge or visionary ecstasy is to increase the power of *hesed* [meaning steadfast love] and compassionate action. . . . It is alive with the awareness of the holiness of Creation and the boundlessness of God's mercy, and is

utterly honest about the necessity of living such awareness in loving service to all beings. . . . With great knowledge and love [come] great responsibility to try to represent the Divine in all things and activities, and to stand up for justice and the dispossessed in a brutal society. (Rabbi Rami Shapiro - *Hasidic Tales: Annotated and Explained* (Jewish Lights Publishing: 2004, 2013), xiii-xiv.)

Amen.