

Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

15th Sunday after Pentecost

Sept. 8, 1985

They thought we were all just backsliders, lazy Christians. Though it was seldom said publicly, the news media in town, otherwise known as the phone lines buzzed with the word of our callous disregard for the principles of the Christian faith.

Why, those Lutherans sold tickets to their Luther League supper in a bar. Their young people had a dance. ~~They~~ They smoke in the church. One week my confirmation class came troubled because ~~their~~ their school bus driver had explained to them that playing cards was participating in demon worship. And I was so unprepared for it all.

I came from a Christian tradition where drinking beer or wine or mixed drinks was normal, neither right nor wrong, though drunkenness was certainly not condoned. And ~~like~~ many of the people I knew from church gathered on Saturday nights for a ~~card~~ ^{pinocle} party throughout the winter. And my grandpa smoked his cigar, and no one ever mentioned it except for the stink. And dancing, why my folks sent me to the dance class when I was in seventh grade, though I fear the lessons were in vain.

But in Goodrich North Dakota, things common and accepted for me were forbidden by the Baptist and Methodist and Church of God and Seventh Day Adventist Churches in town. And they thought of us as people who did not really care about Jesus enough to try very hard, ~~to~~ think.

Since I've moved out here, from some I hear it in a different way. From Lutherans I hear about parents or grandparents. She was such a strong Christian I have been told. Her faith was unshakeable. She never smoked nor drank, never allowed us to play cards in the house, nor go to a movie, certainly never to go dancing. I know I can never be a Christian like her.

The message is clear, we're slipping, less committed, less Christian.

Maybe some of you have felt that way. That we just don't care as much about our faith and that is why our preachers are so lax. Let me assure you, that has nothing to do with it.

It was the same way the Pharisees felt about Jesus and his disciples. "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with hands defiled?" They asked Jesus. For these Pharisees, part of ~~what~~ being obedient to God involved ritual hand washing, washing off the contamination from coming ~~in~~ into contact with sinners and gentiles in the days work. They knew that only those who were holy and pure could be in the presence of God, not those who were unclean, defiled. And Jesus said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me; teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.' You leave the commandment of God and hold fast to the tradition of men."

And he called the people to him again and said to them, Hear me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; but the things which come out of a man are what defile him."

In the Pharisees sight, Jesus was relaxing the rules, rules which were most important. He and his disciples were turning away from traditions that had helped the people of God keep his law. Just as they had done when they plucked had ~~eaten~~ grain as they walked along on the sabbath, Jesus disciples broke traditions and laws when there was really no need to do so, simply convenience.

Yet more than convenience was at stake here. The question of what it means to serve God is at stake. For the Pharisees being Holy as God was holy was most important. Being pure, unstained, faultless, these were the marks of God's true children.

For Jesus reaching out in love was the mark of obedience to God. Whether or not one plucked grain on the sabbath day, or washed after contact with the unclean, these were of ~~it~~ no importance. What mattered was loving your neighbor as yourself. Reaching out to children, and tax collectors and prostitutes, treating women as people and not simply as possessions, ~~these~~ using wealth to bring help to the poor and the hungry, visiting those sick or in prison, giving a cup of cold water to the thirsty, these were the marks of those who were children of God.

XXXXXXAM CONVINCED THE SAME COULD BE CONTINUED TODAY AMONG THOSE WHO CALL
THEMSELVES JESUS FOLLOWERS.

Now my baptist friends from Goodrich would say, "But does one need to smoke or drink or dance or play cards in order to love their neighbor as themselves? And the answer is, No, not any more than Jesus disciples needed to pluck grain on the sabbath or ^{eat} wash with defiled hands. Those who do not smoke or drink or play cards or dance in many cases live by Faith in Jesus Christ and are vehicles for the love of God to reach their neighbors. But when we make of abstaining the condition for being acceptable to God, then we have left Jesus and placed ourselves under human traditions.

It is the same issue Paul faced with the Galatians. They taught that in order to be a Christian one had to be circumcised, accept Jewish dietary laws, and observe the Jewish holy days. Paul said no, to do so is to abandon Christ. For we are made Christians through what he has done, not by what we do or fail to do.

Above all else we Lutherans hold to this: It is through Christ and his grace alone that we are made and kept children of God. If we are to have hope, our hope is in Christ. ~~we are freed from the bondage of the law~~ If I am to be saved, Christ will do it. And any speaking about what a Christian should or must do or not do will only lead people away from Christ and lead them to trust in their own willpower and goodness.

We are not more or less Christian than those who have gone before us. We are Christ's. As those who went before us were, and we pray those who come after us will be.

And as Christ's servant, I will preach not about moral living, nor right or wrong, but about ~~Christ~~ Christ. For Christ did not come to teach us how to be good, but that we are ~~and~~ children of God through him.