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Sermon – Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
September 2, 2018

Once there was a monastery; several times a day the community gathered for worship and prayer. They had a practice of tying the cat up to the pole outside the sanctuary before going in to pray. They continued this practice for many years until the cat grew old and died. Then the community had a big problem on their hands – how were they going to pray without tying a cat up to the pole? After much discussion someone remembered how it was when the cat first came to their community . . . it used to jump up on their laps and rub up against them, sit on their prayer books, so their solution was to tie the cat up to the pole.

The practice around tying up the cat is obviously not scriptural, but was a necessity given their context. They continued this custom to preserve the practice of their faith. It only became problematic when they forgot where it came from and made it more important than their prayers.

The Tradition of the Elders works in a similar way. It is not the Law. The Law is derived from the Torah, the first 4 books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus & Numbers). The Tradition of the Elders is like drawing a fence around the law – it's a buffer zone to make sure there are no inadvertent violations. So, they ritualistically wash their hands before eating, they wash the food they get from the market, they wash cups, pots and bronze kettles. In these examples it's a lot of washing, which seems perfectly sensible to our ears, given what we know about germs . . . but that's not why they were doing it. Presumably they're doing it because they're so freaked out about violating the Law that

they came up with these rules. But Jesus thinks they're doing it because they're avoiding God.

The Pharisees and scribes in this story traveled from Jerusalem, the centre of power for Judaism and the Tradition of the Elders. In that place the buffer zone around the Law had become, in Jesus' judgement, more important than actually practicing their faith. He saw in the Tradition of the Elders an elaborate web of rules that while protecting the Law, overlapped and came into conflict with each other, placing a huge burden on the people to try somehow to do it "right," or creating a loophole for those trying to get out of responsibility.

Jesus doesn't make it sound like this was something the Pharisees prayed over and discerned for long periods of time. It all seems very head level, like they thought of logical solutions to clear problems. Why should we engage the heart in this process, the answer is so clear! Jesus is also clear that this is something to be rejected . . . this tradition that is not God's Law.

In what ways do we avoid God's heart by focusing on our human rules? I personally like to clean and tidy. The house has to be at a certain level of clean and organized before I can do anything else, let alone sit down to pray. I can tidy endlessly before I stop to consider what might be going on underneath, or stop and say, I just need to sit down. I don't know why it's so hard to approach God, but we can find countless reasons why we can't. For most of us it actually takes a lot of discipline and routine to sit with God on a regular basis. If you find it difficult, you are certainly not alone.

One way this stuff shows up in churches is in the way we practice our liturgy . . . in how we worship together. This church community has just come through a season of being face to face with this challenge. The fact that we are all gathered for worship is an affirmation that it is more important to worship together than to worship “my way.” Those who came through the church amalgamation came out the other side with this collective truth. Underneath all of our thoughts, opinions, wishes, commitment to tradition, is the reality that we are one in Christ and it is more important to worship than to be right. In worship we connect with God and remember our oneness in Christ. We are now one church and yet we are not finished becoming Christ Church Gabriola; we are still called to seek after God’s heart as we live into this calling to be church together.

The process was hugely challenging – in some ways it is still hugely challenging as we find our way. We continue to walk around with our opinions, wishes, ideals, though perhaps somewhat loosened by the amalgamation process. I wonder what you find these days when you pray about the church . . . when you drop down into your own heart to seek God’s heart. I wonder what memories or longings we find there of church life in the past or hopes and dreams for the future. I wonder if God is there, holding space for our prayers. I wonder if Christ is there in that spirit of transformation he brings to everything. This is the space where the real work happens . . . this is the work of the heart.

Jesus puts the value on the actual connection with God, a connection that is unique to each of us. We can get hung up on thoughts and

details that are ultimately not primary. My house doesn't need to be clean and straight before I sit down to pray; hearing scripture read in worship is more important than the discussion on how many texts to read and in which order. We seek the heart of God together by hearing the texts read aloud in worship.

We are doing great and still there is personal work to do; still there is congregational work to do. Still there is room to learn from God and from each other about who we are and how to live that out. There will always be room to grow together; we can count on that! We are being a worshipping community; we are doing the thing we set out to do, and that is so important!

For the crowd gathered around him, Jesus has more to say about this business of defilement that has the Pharisees so concerned. He says there isn't anything we can eat that will make us unclean or ordinary; rather it is what comes out of us that is a problem.

We've got all kinds of things going on with us all the time; we don't like to feel negative feelings, evil intentions, much less act on them. When we come to our senses sometimes we feel badly, like where did that come from? Who am I? Jesus pinpoints the origin of these feelings and intentions in the heart . . . describing the heart as the source of all feelings, both positive and negative. We pray in Psalm 51, "give me a clean heart, O God and put a new and right spirit within me." Our hearts are human and cycle with feelings as we encounter the stuff of life.

I wonder, though, if it is not our hearts themselves, but something blocking our hearts or speaking louder than our hearts that is the source of negative things within us. I feel love, joy, sorrow and grief in my heart . . . I'm not so sure about envy or pride. I wonder if we look beyond ill intentions we will find pain or brokenness motivating these feelings. I wonder if our human hearts are pure, but are blocked by parts of us still in need of transformation.

Seeking God's heart is a bit hard to define or understand sometimes, but it is so good for us. It feeds us from the source of all life, it infuses us with goodness, with hope, acceptance. It offers guidance, good boundaries and a relationship that is faithful to the end. Jesus gives us indicators for when we have connected with God's heart – those indicators are the commandments Jesus highlights for us.

Love God

Love your neighbour

Love yourself

Love one another as Christ loves us

The source of this love is in the heart of God.