

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
Weekly Eucharist
August 26, 2009

Habits and Patterns

Some of you may have been around this summer when the university went bonkers over the H1N1 virus, otherwise known as swine flu. Seems the hog farmers take offense at the derogatory insinuations about their livelihood when we use the slang term, so now we should all say H1N1. I think that's probably better, since it's not the poor pigs' fault that humans can't handle germs appropriately, swine or otherwise. Still, the university did have its own close encounter with H1N1 this summer and closed down their prestigious TIP Summer Academy, East Campus, for the first time in the history of the program. West Campus stayed open.

In the midst of all this I was teaching at the Divinity School where we typically worship every day and celebrate Eucharist every week. Before the term started, however, the director and the faculty had to decide whether we ought to continue our weekly communion celebration and, if so, what precautions we should take to prohibit the spread of H1N1. As you might imagine, mine was among the loudest voices appalled that we would consider canceling communion. I stopped short of quoting scripture, but I might have said: "there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."

I don't mean to say that the H1N1 virus is not serious stuff. Of course it is. And I wash my hands before I celebrate Eucharist every time I celebrate Eucharist. I always have. But the obsession with hand washing that's been prevalent since the H1N1 pandemic was declared is an interesting commentary on how we pattern our lives. Washing our hands before we eat and after we go to the bathroom is something we should have been doing since we were two years old. We need a pandemic to teach us basic hygiene? I should hope not. Cover your mouth when you sneeze; I learned that in kindergarten. It's so much a habit, I don't even think about it.

The Pharisees come to Jesus with a complaint about hand washing, not the basic hygiene kind of hand washing that the CDC encourages, but ritual hand washing and ritual food cleansing and ritual pot scrubbing. In other words, they say, Jesus and the disciples aren't going through the motions. They just squirt on some hand sanitizer and sit down to eat. And they eat, you may remember, with tax collectors and prostitutes, with sinners. It's a habit Jesus has, a habit of sitting with those on the margins, a habit of including the excluded, a habit of restoring wholeness to those who are broken.

These are very different habits than the ones we usually learn about when we watch what makes the world go round. The world teaches us many of things that Jesus declares as defiling. The world doesn't call it avarice, but the world certainly adores rich people. The world doesn't call it envy, but television commercials and magazine advertisements are full of products we should want. And we do want them; our avarice can help us acquire them. The world doesn't call it pride, but the world certainly expects us to excel. We have come to Duke University for heaven's sake—we are excelling. We don't call it pride, we call it accomplishment, achievement, ability.

Better watch out for these things, Jesus tells us. They can cause some really bad habits to form. Instead, he recommends we pattern our lives on the commandment of God. Simple rules: love God, love your neighbor. These can be just as habitual as washing our hands. The difference is when we get in the habit of loving God and loving our neighbors, we shape our lives in ways that are life sustaining rather than life draining.

We do have to practice, however. Think about the multiplication tables. I memorized them in the second grade, maybe you did too. I haven't had a math class since my sophomore year at Duke, before you were born, but I still know those multiplication tables. My point is, if you do something long enough it will become a habit, even a habit you can draw on in your life long after you stop practicing it on a regular basis.

So, whether or not we will form habits is not the question. The question is, what kinds of habits will we form. The Pharisees were in the habit of ritual cleansing, cleansing their hands, their food, their cookware, and they looked down on the people with different habits. Don't kid yourself that we don't make the same kinds of judgment calls on people who are different from us. Of course, we do, and we should probably work on breaking that habit.

If we look carefully at the list of things that Jesus provides for us to look down on, we see that these are things that create division and exclusion for other people. If you commit adultery it will create division; trust me on that one. If you employ deceit, it will cause exclusion. So on down the list; these are things that harm other people and they harm us. They're not on the list because Jesus is a party-pooper. We know better than that; the man turns water into wine for heaven's sake. These things are on the list because they exclude others and create division. It's not an exhaustive list. It's just a place to start; a place for us to begin thinking about the difference between practices that are life draining and life sustaining.

Get into some good habits; habits that will pattern our lives in ways that are life sustaining. We should do some things to help us learn these patterns. One of those things is coming to this table where we gather with friends, tell the story, and break some bread. The story tells us we're included; the bread shows us we can live differently from the way the world expects us to live; the cup promises that this way of life will sustain us on this day and for evermore. Thanks be to God. Amen.