

## Risky Worship, Risky Discipleship: Is Cleanliness Next to Godliness?

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

First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota

September 2, 2018

Rev. Glen Bell

Nicholas Kristof and his daughter have hiked the entire Pacific Crest Trail – Washington, Oregon and California – in different sections during the last six years. That’s 2,650 miles of hiking!

Kristof authored a New York Times article of their journeys. He writes, “Nature disciplined us, and sometimes frightened us, by making us ford high rivers, cross steep snow banks – or by getting us lost. Early one hiking season . . . when the trail disappeared beneath several feet of snow . . . we became uttered lost for a couple of days. I was thrilled to eventually come across footprints in the snow. We had stumbled on a trail!

“But after a while, my daughter noticed that the footprints had claws. ‘Dad,’ she said, ‘I think that’s a bear you are following.’”

On a couple of occasions in the North Carolina mountains or out in the deep woods, I have encountered the risk of trusting the trail. I have started out hiking, enjoying the beauty of the morning and the wonders of nature, but as time passed, I discovered there is an uncomfortable amount of distance between one blaze, one trail marker, to the next. Over and over again I worried that I had lost the trail.

Sometimes I think that is one of reasons we allow worship and God’s Word to become routine, even mundane: We experience so much concern that we may not be hearing the Scriptures clearly, understanding God accurately, or following Jesus on the right trail that we make worship into something smaller – everyday, ordinary, predictable. We re-live our anxiety by not expecting God to show up here, at least not the real God, the boundless, powerful, transforming God. We shrink our hearts and cheat ourselves of wonder.

The excitement and risk and promise of the Christian life become tame.

It’s easy for this to happen. Take the first few verses of our Gospel lesson this morning. Some of the religious leaders of the day noticed that Jesus’ friends and followers did not make time to ritually clean their hands before eating.

And we think, “What? Is this what the Bible focuses on? Rules of hygiene?”

It’s a little bit like when we are at the stadium or the movie theater or even here at church. We do find ourselves noticing when someone hurries out of the bathroom without washing their hands. But we *never* want to be known as that person!

So what good can come out of focusing on the outward rules and rituals and regulations?

At first, Jesus responds in a way that we appreciate and applaud. “It’s crazy,” he replies, “to be careful to go through all the motions – being careful to wash one’s hands and follow all the rules – if your heart is not truly in it. You abandon what’s really important to God and go straight to doing what comes naturally – even if it turns out sometimes to be selfish, good only for you and not at all helpful for your neighbor.”

Following rules, you see, is far easier – far less risky - than changing our hearts.

Loye Bradley Ashton teaches religion at Tougaloo College in Mississippi. He nails it. “We get so wrapped up in the proper symbolic ways of representing our faith . . . that we overlook the deeper demands of that faith to serve God by doing good.” This is “the quintessential human struggle to

discover and maintain the integrity of the self,” he adds, and to avoid hypocrisy in our personal and religious lives.

This is the gift of Jesus today, to free us our worry. We are originally and intrinsically valued by God – period. We are not graded according to rules and regulations. Jesus says, “There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile them.”

Pastor and preacher Morgan Roberts puts it this way. “You don’t need anything other than your ordinary humanity to be a part of the ongoing story of Jesus. You don’t need to go back to school. You don’t need a facelift or a better body. . . .The story goes on, and you are invited to be some essential part of that story, beginning today. There is no need to wait another moment.”

Jesus challenges head on the religious leaders’ insistence on handwashing rituals. He frees us from having to approach God in a certain way, at a certain time, with a certain ritual. God always yearns for us to participate in worship, always is eager to hear our prayers 24/7, always is willing and ready to forgive when we have really messed it up.

God knows our hands and hearts often need washing. But the Lord doesn’t insist we need to feel bad about ourselves or to start with rules rather than heart.

Worship and discipleship are risky, but we at first misunderstand the nature of the risk. We think we need to know the right handshake to come through the church doors, that we need to understand all the jargon (“session” and “narthex” and all the rest), that we need to figure out the pastor and church leaders the same way we try to figure out our teacher the first few weeks of school.

But no, that’s not it.

Cindy Rigby, our former Faith Focus Weekend speaker, has written a lovely new book on following Jesus, entitled *Holding Faith*. It is a great introduction to our life of faith, and I highly commend it to you.

In it, she both assures and challenges us at the same time by inviting us to focus less on what we can say and understand about God, and “more about testifying to *how what we do know matters*.” It’s less about rules of washing hands and cups and pots and kettles, and more about the difference we know our faith makes in our lives.

She relates a story about Christian and author Madeline L’Engle. “A woman came up to her after a lecture and said, ‘I read *A Wrinkle in Time* when I was eight or nine. I didn’t understand it, but I knew what it was about.’”

I didn’t understand it, but I knew what it was about.

“L’Engle goes on to comment that, once we know ‘what it’s about,’ we will ‘have the courage to go wherever we are asked to go, even if we fear that the road might take us through danger and pain.’”

That’s it. We may not understand all the rules and regulations and jargon; we may not understand the Trinity or the incarnation or be able to define salvation or predestination, but we still know what’s it’s about. It’s about love, about selfless care for our neighbors and world, about working for peace and justice, about sharing the great Good News of Jesus.

Here’s what I should have said. It’s about risky love, about caring for our neighbors and the world in risky ways, about working for justice at great cost to ourselves, about sharing the Good News of the Gospel in risky ways.

And in the midst of the risk and the giving, discovering that we have found our home.

You and I are tempted to turn away from the church because we can’t imagine a journey of 2,650 miles. We can’t yet understand it all. But our heart is yearning for the awe and wonder that invite us to take that next step each day.

You and I let our spiritual lives become routine or mundane, because we are afraid we don't measure up, that God just can't love us the way we are. But Jesus proclaims that nothing outside us can make us beyond the bounds of God's love. Morgan Roberts is right. "God has no enemies. . . . God is not angry with us. . . . There may be times God is sad with us, when we are saddened by our failures." God is love, and God is always pointing to ways for us to grow and discover our true self.

God loves us. The Lord doesn't want us to be something we are not. God doesn't want us to jump through hoops to become "good enough." No, God wants us to discover the depth of the divine love - and the joy of what it means to be fully human.

Right then, right there, we arrive at the final three verses of today's Gospel lesson. Jesus reminds us that discovering God's joy, learning what it means to be a person, is caught up - intertwined - every day in our intentions and our actions. We don't make joy happen. We don't create ourselves as persons. But our choices help put us in places where we can experience joy.

You see, we miss it if we hear the end of this passage as just more rules - don't have sex with anyone outside of marriage; don't be deceitful and try to get ahead by shading the truth; don't become so focused on yourself that you lose sight of others.

No, these words from Jesus are not law, not rules.

Instead, these words are God's invitation and direction to life in its richness and joy. These words are God's colorful blazes along the trail of our lives. They lead us to integrity.

Oh, we may watch enough movies to think that happiness and excitement come from an extramarital affair, but that's leading us in the wrong direction. We may see enough ads to begin thinking that increased income or power from a little envy and deceit will make us feel better, but it will be at the cost of our shrinking heart. We may begin to believe that just a little wickedness proves our savvy, but it will separate us from being fully human.

This is the risk of worship and the risk of discipleship, trusting God enough to let go of our evil intentions, trusting Christ enough to renounce the temptations that come from within and without.

God shows us the way because God loves us completely.

Sometimes the path of deceit or folly or envy seems shiny and attractive. But God invites to the journey of trust and faith, even when the trail blazes lead upward through rocky terrain, even when we are not sure we have the strength to keep walking. God still leads us upward.

God has the strength. And God will help us every step.

So keep risking. Keep following Jesus. Keep climbing.