



The Westminster Pulpit

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“Where do you draw the line?” **Sermon on Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23**

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We kicked off last week with a theme for the fall. “Choose this day whom you will serve, but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” Joshua said that. Joshua drew a line for the people of God. He asked the crowd, “Why on earth are you here? Are you here on this earth to serve the empty gods of Egypt? Are you here to serve the gods of the wilderness? Those gods of bitterness, anger, frustration.” “Choose this day whom you will serve, but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

What does it mean to serve the Lord? It might help to know who the Lord is. There was once the very popular saying, “What would Jesus do?” Not a bad question; the answer comes from looking at what the Lord did.

The lectionary brings us to the seventh chapter of Mark, and just as Joshua drew the line, so too, Jesus. So listen for the Word of God.

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

7 Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, ²they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. ³(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) ⁵So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” ⁶He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

‘This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;

⁷ in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

⁸ You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

¹⁴ Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.

²¹ For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²² adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

“Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” Apparently, the disciples had crossed the line.

What an odd thing to get wrapped around the axle about hand washing. When it comes to health matters, that’s not where the friction is these days. But I’m not going there. Look! When was the last time you laid down the law on hand washing?

If you have small children, perhaps it wasn’t too long ago. It’s not a religious thing, it’s a “You don’t want to get sick. Wash your hands!” thing. It’s a “Don’t get your sticky hands on the furniture. Wash your hands!” thing. It’s a “Don’t touch me! Wash your hands!” thing. And children learn not to cross the line. What follows is five seconds of soap and water and a hand towel that afterwards, looks like it came from the Jiffy Lube. If you’re a parent of young children, hand washing may be something you’re battling every day.

I don’t think much at all about defiled hands, but this week in Waverly, TN was different. Mucking out a couple of homes after that flood, we got on the bus, then off the bus in a parking lot where there was a group giving away food. Let me tell you, that place has enough food, water, and clothing for a long time.

As we walked toward the aroma of food, one in our group had a little bottle of hand sanitizer. He squirted a bit in his hand and then offered it to another. “I’ll take some,” I said from behind. I took a squirt, then offered it to another. Who said something along the lines of “No thanks. What doesn’t kill you will only make you stronger.” What he said obviously registered with me, but he didn’t cross the line with me. It’s his decision. It wasn’t like we were at the buffet on a cruise ship, or “bacteria boats” as I like to call them. We were outside. They were handing us a foam container of food; I didn’t have to touch what he touched. His decision would not impact me at all. Not at all!

Unless, of course, his decision didn’t make him stronger, but ended up on the first half of his statement. Well, then that does impact me. I’ll have to get all dressed up in black in the summer and say, “Family and friends, we are gathered here today in the presence of God because he didn’t wash his hands.”

Look there! I just crossed the line in speaking so flippantly about death. When in fact, I know, trust me, I know, because over and over again your life crosses the line into my life. I know, trust me, I know, time and time again because I have the privilege of listening to tears. When you are gone from this earth, someone will lay out an image of you that is so beautiful, that I would, on a stack of Bibles, swear that the image of you is that of God.

Life is beautiful and life is so fragile. We need to treat one another with such great respect. Watch your words because you never know when they may be your last words.

Maybe you know or maybe you read about the Anglican priest here in town, Thomas McKenzie. Last Monday, on the first day of his sabbatical while taking his daughter back to school out west, the traffic slowed, he crossed the line, and slammed into the back of tractor trailer, killing them both. There is a congregation this morning in deep grief. We need to keep them in our prayers. Last Sunday, his last words before he went on sabbatical was to remind the congregation that there will be moments in life that they will not understand. He said, "Don't do this life on your own." They are taking his words to heart right now as they gather together in love and prayer, leaning into one another, and leaning into God.

You understand that buried in this text, with all its arguing and division, is something important. There is a something very important.

What would Jesus do? What did Jesus say? Jesus said, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." And Jesus has a list, "the lust, the greed, the wickedness, the slander, the pride, the folly." Look, we are being bombarded by toxicity of each and every moment. It's in the air we breathe. It's in the water we drink. It's in the lettuce we munch on. I suspect Jesus knows the world is out to get us, and if we asked him, he might give us some very good answers about how to live a long life. But Jesus seems less interested in longevity and more interested in the gift of life - how we treat one another.

James said it this way, "You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness." "Every perfect gift is from above!"

I had to draw a line this week. I was in Waverly, TN for a couple of days last week with a number of folks from Westminster mucking out houses. Inside the dining room of one of the homes, Carson handed me a straight edge that was about 10 feet long. He held up his end on the wall. I held up my end on the wall and we drew a line.

Everything above the line we keep. Everything below the line was for the sledgehammer and pry bar. I didn't think about that moment again until I got home, and I looked at everything in my house that would have turned to garbage below the line. In fact, I'd like for you to do that. Sometime today find your favorite spot in your home to sit and look around. Draw a line about four feet up, and imagine what it would be like to see all that is below the line to be picked up by strangers and hauled to the curb. This is what stays, and this is what goes.

You see, last week there was a line that was made with water. For a few terrifying moments, some were caught trying to keep-their heads above the line. Every good and perfect gift is from above and it is called “air we breathe.” And you fight the enemy, the rising water, with all your heart, mind, and strength. You fight that thing that is trying to take from you. Your children from your arms. Your life.

And people gathered in church this week in that little town, and everyone remembered a child, a man, a woman. The light that shined forth from their lives, and reflected in each and every one of those people.

Where do you want to draw the line these days? Above the line is all the stuff you can keep. Below the line is all the stuff you can throw away.

In the heat of Waverly, Tom Wilson said to me, “Isn’t it interesting that we worked all day with all sorts of people, and no one mentioned politics or the pandemic or religion. We were all on the same page.” He was right.

After lunch, I went back to work, and there was a Baptist gentleman who lived in town. He caught up to me, handed me a wad of cash, and said “Thank you!” I don’t know if he was Baptist. He just looked like a Baptist. I know I crossed the line again. That’s stereotyping and that’s wrong. But, in your mind’s eye, picture a guy who is in his late 50’s, early 60’s. Do you have the picture? Now imagine him being from Waverly, TN. Now imagine him being a Baptist. That’s exactly what the guy looked like. You all can compare notes after worship as to what he looked like. I guess what I’m saying is he didn’t give off the vibe of being Presbyterian. Presbyterians don’t hand over wads of cash to strangers. We tend to write checks. He handed me a wad a cash. “Want me to take your name and address? I can have our business office send you a...” “No.” I’m telling you, this guy was not Presbyterian. He was different.

I could tell by looking at him that if we sat down together, there would be few things we would agree on. But as Tom said, “Isn’t it interesting that we worked all day, and no one said a word” about any of that stuff. The water just washed it away.

My Baptist friend handed me a wad of bills and said, “I don’t know what’s going to happen with all of this, or all our houses. Some of these, I suspect will get condemned. But you folks just showing up and doing something - it just helps me to know that we’re not alone right now. It means a lot that we’re not alone right now.”

I think he crossed the line, in a day and age when we’re drawing lines, he crossed the line with a word from above. It just felt to me like the vertical intersected the horizontal and made a cross. He so vulnerable. It just looked like a sacrifice of the heart, a commandment from God, a good word. So very rare these days. Choose this day which word you want to follow, but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.