

“Word Power”

Valley Presbyterian Church – August 30, 2009

Rev. John Wahl

Psalm 15

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15

I may have been born in the year of the first lunar landing and the summer of Woodstock, but I grew up as a child of the 70's. If you don't believe me, there are photos of a boy with plaid shorts, long, striped tube socks and a mop haircut to prove it.

My early years in church were also vintage 1970's. I remember when our church became the proud owner of a bible story series on filmstrips – which was supposedly going to revolutionize the teaching of Sunday School – although, as it turned out, none of the teachers knew how to run the projector. And so, instead, every week we were taught through the time-tested tool: the felt board. I remember spending hours with my mother – who was the Sunday School superintendent – cutting out paper figures for the coming week's bible story to go on the felt board: all the animals for Noah's Ark, David and Goliath, Mary and Joseph in the manger with – again – all the animals.

And so, my earliest memories of bible stories are embedded in my brain in magical 2-D. After a while, we could recognize some of the main characters even before the stories would be told. Moses with his staff, Joseph with his coat of many colors, and Jesus with his usual cast of followers. It was easy to pick out the Pharisees in these stories, not just because of the fancy clothes they wore, but also by the smug looks on their faces; seemingly always knowing the right answers; always trying to catch Jesus doing or saying the wrong thing.

It's not surprising that I grew up thinking that these Pharisees were simple, two-dimensional characters. And it's tempting, even to this day, to think of them in the same way. In the stories of the gospel, their attention seems to be focused on the same few issues: circumcision, ritual purity, and Sabbath observance. To a Jew, circumcision was a clear enough issue – a sign of being either in or out of the community. But, the other two – observing the traditional rituals of the elders and keeping the day of the Sabbath holy – were also important markers showing who was committed to the Jewish way. To mark their importance, a long list of rules and regulations developed – many of which we still observe in orthodox Jewish cultures – as signs of devotion to God.

A story has been passed around about a mother and son who came forward in church one Sunday to receive communion. The boy reached out his hands, but before the minister could place the wafer in his hand, the mother pulled him back to correct him, for tradition had taught her that the right hand must be crossed over the left. To receive communion with the left hand would be an abomination to God. Sheepishly, the boy continued forward, receiving the wafer, but not thinking about the bread of life which had just been given to him.¹

Our challenge today is to recognize how we, not unlike the Pharisees, misinterpret what is most important to God. How much attention is paid to what we – or our children – wear or say or do or do not do while we are in church, which is a different from the rest of our week? And how many people do you suppose have stayed away from church because they did not want others to be judged according to what they – or their children – look like or say or do in this holy place?

When the Pharisees approach Jesus and ask why his disciples eat with unwashed hands, it is not a question, but an accusation. They were not concerned with the physical harm that can result from not washing your hands – something that we are very aware of these days. Instead, they accused Jesus of not teaching his disciples to be Jewish – or at least not Jewish enough for their standards – because they had broken from tradition. The heart of the Jewish tradition – known in Hebrew as the *shema*: loving God and loving neighbor – had been replaced by man-made traditions; not wrong in and of themselves, but not originally the central focus of their faith.

What is at the heart of our own religious faith and traditions? In some ways, of course, we are not too different from the Pharisees who sought to demonstrate reverence for the tradition of the elders, which can be shown through maintaining rituals like hand-washing before meals. Our particular brand of faith – the Presbyterian church – emphasizes doing things “decently and in order.” That is why we are encouraged to follow an order of worship which, as you can see from this morning’s liturgy, has seemingly not changed a whole lot over the past fifty-two years.

But, I think that it has. One change that has been made – here in this church and in lots of other Presbyterian churches – is that we have moved the placement of the sermon in the worship service. This morning, in keeping with the older tradition, the offering was collected earlier in the service, and the worship hour essentially ends with the sermon. As a preacher, I can see the advantage of this: when the preaching moment happens last in the service, it becomes the focal point. The reformers chose to place the

¹ Lucy Bregman in *Lectionary Homiletics*, Aug-Sept 2006

sermon here because it can be the teaching moment, the big finish, and worshippers might be more apt to remember the words of the preacher as they leave the church and then, hopefully, carry those words with them for the rest of the week.

In our modern liturgy, though, the sermon has been moved forward in the service; offered right after the reading of the scriptures. The prayers of the people and the offering are therefore given an honored place as the points in the service when we respond to God's word by working in the world. It is through the offering of our prayers for others as well as the offering of our whole lives – our time, our talents, and our treasure – that we truly honor the *shema* – which Jesus restates as the greatest of all the commandments – love of God and love of neighbor.

I know a lot of people in my generation who do not go to church and what I hear from them is that they are making that choice for basically two reasons. First, they view the church in much the same way that Jesus sees the Pharisees. They see the church getting hung up on the little things – maybe not hand-washing but other rituals and traditions that ought not be the core of what God wants and expects from us. They feel as if the questions they would be asked in a church, such as: “why can't your kids sit still?” or “where were you last Sunday?” would really be accusations. They want acceptance as sinful people with broken lives, something that I know the church wants to offer them.

Second, I hear from non-churchgoers that they don't know what they have to offer to a church, or that what the church wants, they don't have to give. It is hard to be on a committee when you are not sure what next Tuesday, much less the third Tuesday of every month, has in store for you and your job and your family. They don't know how to make an annual pledge when they don't know if they will still have a job next month. They can't imagine committing to a three-year term on session when they have not lived in the same place for three straight years since college.

These are the things they think the church wants from them, but we know that's not true. We want the church to be a place of both giving and receiving: sometimes not in equal portions. We want the church to be a place of true sanctuary, a holy destination; we want the church to become a second home; especially when the primary home often seems chaotic. We want the church to be a place where gifts can be explored and discovered, where opportunities for nurture, service and healing abound. We want the church to teach the importance of prayer, and then to pray with and for one another. We want the church to model the love and grace that Jesus showered upon all who needed it, and to show them the path to God that Jesus had already bridged.

In confronting the Pharisees – who had just confronted him – Jesus teaches about actions and attitudes that reflect a heart that has turned away from God. As Dawn Wilhelm says, “To examine the heart of our religious faith, we must be willing to explore honestly whether our actions and attitudes reveal genuine love for God and compassion for others.”² What word of grace can you share that will show that love and compassion? How might you invite someone to see what the church truly can be?

We live in an age where those who are outside of the church look inside and see what Jesus saw in the Pharisees. Having open doors and an open table are good, but – for many – it is no longer enough. As Christ’s disciples, we must share the good news that in this place, we are not checking to make sure that hands are washed, but instead that God welcomes all, that Christ welcomes all, and that we have been called not to accuse, but to invite others to discover the life that we have come to know as Christ’s body. Amen.

² Dawn Wilhelm in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 4