

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd
Pentecost 15
September 2, 2018

Miss The Mark OR Bull's Eye
Mark 7:1-23

What we first need to understand about this morning's Gospel reading is that the pharisees represented a huge step forward in terms of religious participation among the people. In the Bible, the only command about washing hands applies exclusively to priests before they approach the altar for sacrifice (Ex. 30:17-21). The Pharisees applied this same reference to the everyday act of eating and insisted that washing was a requirement of all Jews.

Can we understand this passage then in a positive light? In many ways, the Pharisees anticipated the Lutheran understanding of the priesthood of all believers. The goal was for everyone to devote themselves to God, not just the clergy. They believed that God could be experienced every day in every place, even in the mundane activities like eating and washing. Just makes sense to me. So why, then, is Jesus so upset?

It turns out that you can do the right thing for the wrong reason. This week in preparation for this sermon I have been thinking about the definition of sin. It is an interesting question, isn't it? How would you define sin?

There are words in the Hebrew Bible that, while translated as sin, really means to wander or go astray from God. This makes sense because the word for law, is Torah, and it relates to the idea of being guided down a path. Accordingly, those who stray from God's path are sinners.

This is the exact accusation which the pharisees charge against the disciples. They ask Jesus, “Why are your disciples not walking according to the tradition of our elders?” In other words, why, Jesus, have you allowed your followers to sin by not doing what they are supposed to do?

This understanding of sin seems straightforward, but what if we cannot agree on the exact boundaries of the path? If the lines are not clearly marked, then a few steps in a different direction might be interpreted as wandering off or straying from the path. But what if that person is actually blazing a new trail. Is that a “sin” to discover a new way, perhaps different from the tradition of our elders and ancestors? I don’t think so...

In his critiques of the Pharisees, it seems to me that Jesus offers a different understanding of sin. Rather than turning from the path, sin can be thought of as **missing the mark - not hitting the bulls’ eye**. It’s like Jesus is faulting the Pharisees for having bad aim. Their error is not that they tried to do something new; it was good that they wanted all people of faith to show reverence. But they have made the act itself the object of devotion, not the God who supposedly stands behind it. And so, they have missed the mark, doing the right thing...but for the wrong reason. God have mercy on us! I worry that the church today is guilty of this type of sin.

I recently read a scathing critique of American missionary efforts as “vacationaries.” Sure it is good, even laudable, to travel to another country to lend a helping hand; but many of these would-be helpers are more concerned with “feeling good” about themselves instead of addressing the real needs of the communities they serve. There is a neighborhood in Tijuana where children “have learned to pretend they’ve never heard the gospel,” because church groups arrive every couple of weeks to shower them with messages about salvation. A former trainer of church youth leaders near the Mexican border observes church groups that come in, run a vacation Bible school and lead the kids to Christ – and then it happens all over again. The mission, you see, is more about missionaries/vacationaries than the people. And so, we miss the mark, doing the right thing for the wrong reasons.

This modern day story gets at some of the frustrations that I think Jesus felt towards the Pharisees. You, too, might be thinking, how could those groups be so selfish and misguided. Like the Pharisees, it is obvious that they missed the mark: they were guilty of focusing so much on the act itself that they forgot to worship God. Better yet, they worshipped the gods of their own making, their own satisfaction, their own pride.

Jesus has a harsh word for those who miss the mark in this manner: He calls them hypocrites. This word comes from the world of theatre in which actors wore masks. They were just pretending to be something else. Of course, this is fine in a play, but Jesus makes it clear that the spiritual life consists of something else entirely.

Living a life without hypocrisy is about living faithfully. The great Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, famously said that, “Purity of heart is to will one thing.” The “one thing” is “to will as God wills.”

It is to choose to live with integrity, doing the right things, not out of a sense of obligation or self-seeking praise, but out of love for God alone. It is one thing to talk about this idea philosophically, but what does it look like in real life?

There is a story I read about some time ago about a pastor who attended the Washington Nationals Major League baseball game with his father and his brother, John. The father, who lives in Raleigh, N.C. met him in Richmond, and they took a train together, while the pastor’s brother, John, came in on the train from New York. It is actually easier not to have a car in D.C; they have a subway system that connects hotels to the baseball stadium. How neat is that!!

Shortly after they arrived the game was interrupted by an hour and fifteen minute rain delay. Then the teams battled into extra innings – thirteen innings to be exact. They didn’t get back to the subway station until about 1 a.m. in the morning. Which wouldn’t have been a problem, except the subway closed at midnight. What were they going to do??

As the pastor debated this question, he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned around and saw a young man who was decked out in the Washington Nationals gear: cap, shorts, and a replica of a Major League jersey.

This young man also had Down's Syndrome. "I have to go home" this young man said, gesturing towards the closed station, "can you help me?"

Thankfully the pastor's brother, John knew exactly what to do. He lives in New York City and had a smart phone. He whipped out his device, got on the Internet, and pulled up the DC bus schedule. Then he led the young man to the correct bus stop and patiently explained which bus to take. John did a fantastic job of explaining what to do, and the young man was visibly calmer. But they were going in the opposite direction, so the pastor resigned himself to the inevitable fact that they would never know if this young man got home safe.

However, while he was lying awake thinking about this very thing, the pastor's father suddenly remembered an editorial that he had read a few months back... written by the famous columnist George Will...about his son, who had Down's Syndrome, and went to every single Nationals baseball game by himself... riding on the Subway.

When the pastor returned home, he sent George will an e-mail, and he quickly responded, assuring them that his son did come home that night, safe and sound. His son is also named John.

Now, John didn't help this young man because he thought he was famous or that he would get credit. He didn't patiently and ably explain the directions because he figured his own name and picture would be in the Papers the next day. He simply did the right thing for the right reason. And it turned out that his actions had a profound impact beyond our wildest imaginations, two young men, who share the same name, different to be sure...yet united by something greater. If to sin means to miss the mark, then I believe that John, the pastor's brother, hit the bull's eye.

As you and I seek the best way forward as individuals, as a church, and as a society, we may have to do something different. Certain paths might be blocked or closed, and we may have to adjust our plans and expectations. We may even have to rely on others to teach us new ways of acting. But God's grace, even if it is unexpected, is always just the right thing at just the right time.

This passage is certainly heavy on law, but there is gospel here too, at least implicitly in light of the larger story. This text shows us that Jesus sees clearly the ugliness of human hearts, yet he does not turn away. He sees right through our highly edited versions of ourselves, knows what lurks in our hearts, yet loves us still. In the larger story of the Gospel, he shows us what true faithfulness is by daring to touch those considered unclean, by daring to love those who are social outcasts, by loving and serving and giving his life for all people -- tax collectors and sinners, lepers and demon-possessed, scribes and Pharisees, and even the likes of you and me.

This good news exerts a claim on our lives, a call to follow. Following Jesus is not about separating ourselves from those considered less holy or unclean. Following Jesus means that like Jesus, we get our hands dirty serving others, caring especially for those whom the world has cast aside. True faithfulness is not about clean hands, but a heart cleansed and a life shaped by the radical, self-giving love of God in Christ.

Let's be like Jesus and do the Christ-like thing! Let's give ourselves away for the life of the world!! Amen.