

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | AUGUST 29, 2021

DEUTERONOMY 4:1-2, 6-9 | PSALM 15 | JAMES 1:17-27 | MARK 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

There's an advertisement I've seen on TV a couple of times recently for some family ancestry product. In the ad, some individual talks about how they always wanted to know more about where they came from. So they signed up for this ancestry product and got access to this trove of documents, and now that they've spent hours poring over these old records, they really understand who they are.

But if you've ever dug through old archives, you know that your most common thought isn't *Now I understand who I am*. It's *What on earth am I looking at?* We often expect those who came before us to reflect our own problems and concerns and beliefs back at us. But it turns out they're often dealing with some issue we can't get our minds around.

Today's gospel reading is kind of like that. This is a debate between Jesus and the Pharisees about the proper way to honor Jewish dietary law in their first century context. And because we don't share their social, religious, or cultural worldview, our initial response is probably *What on earth am I looking at?* It's tempting to just write off the whole thing as an insular debate that has nothing to do with us. But, no surprise, I'm going to tell you that this has everything to do with us.

To understand today's reading, you have to understand why these Jewish dietary laws existed in the first place. If you read Deuteronomy and Leviticus, where the dietary laws come from, you see that they are intended primarily to remind the community of their relationship with God. Amy Jill-Levine, a scholar of Jewish life during this time, reminds us that these dietary laws "helped Jews resist assimilation, served as a sign of Jewish identity, helped support the poor, and otherwise reminded them that they were Israel, the covenant community."¹ In other words, you keep the dietary law because it reminds you of God's covenant with you and your ancestors. Because you keep it every day, you "neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor... let them slip from your mind."

But you probably noticed that the main issue in today's gospel reading isn't about dietary laws at all. It's about handwashing. And if you go back to those lists of dietary rules from Deuteronomy and Leviticus, you'll notice there's nothing in them about handwashing at all. Which is exactly the point. These rules about how you washed your hands before eating were a human invention. They were a norm put in place by religious teachers that go above and beyond the letter of the law.

And this is where you have to be really careful as a reader of this text. Because it's very easy to miss that distinction between Jewish dietary law and these extra traditions and just throw them in the same bucket. There are lots of well-meaning but misguided people who read this as a story about how Judaism is legalistic and burdensome, and Jesus is here to tell everybody to just chill out.

But there's a very important distinction between those two things. And that distinction is what Jesus points us to. The dietary laws create a sense of community and solidarity and remembrance. The handwashing tradition creates a hierarchy. The normal people are down here, and the super religious, spiritually enlightened people are up here. Instead of reminding people of their covenant with God, these human traditions either create a false sense of superiority or an unmerited sense of guilt.

Jesus parses out the distinction in two clever ways. First, Jesus says that the Pharisees are right to be concerned, but they're concerned about the wrong thing. Jesus doesn't drop the language

¹ Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: New Revised Standard Version Bible Translation* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 502.

of purity and defilement. Which makes sense because that language is about remembering God's covenant with us. Jesus keeps the language but changes the location. He says that it's not just about you and your food. It's about your heart, and it's about your neighbor. That whole list of actions that Jesus gives, murder, avarice, wickedness, slander, etc., that's all about how we relate to other people. And Jesus says that that's where defilement happens, too.

Which means the type of community that we build, that we create, that we foster, communicates something about how God liberates us from death and leads us into life. That's true for our church. That's true for our families. That's true for our relationships. That's true for our town and country and world and everywhere in between. Every interaction we have with another person, every institution we participate in, every relationship we have, communicates something about God's promise to us. In the same way that every religious ritual we perform reminds us of our relationship with God, every encounter we have with another person can remind us of and communicate something about God's character. Our relationships can create shame and superiority. Or they can reflect the loving-kindness of God.

And that's true not only of our neighbors we live with today but with the traditions of our neighbors who came before us. This is the fun part. The criticism that Jesus makes here isn't that traditions are bad. After all, everyone is operating in some kind of tradition.² The criticism Jesus makes is that these traditions fail to be life-giving when they point back to themselves. In the context of today's story, traditions go awry when, instead of conveying something about God's character, they serve only to make us feel superior or make us feel ashamed.

Just as all of our relationships with our neighbors communicate something about God's character, so do all of our traditions that we've inherited from others. Jesus enables us, gives us permission, to take the traditions and practices that we have received and look at them critically and ask what purpose they serve. If they communicate something integral about the character of God, great. But if they're just here to make us feel superior or make others feel less guilty or just because of plain old inertia, then it's probably best to leave them behind. After all, traditions have a funny way of turning into idols.

So what is the vision Jesus gives us here? Well, put those two ideas together and you get a pretty good definition of freedom. We are freed from spiritual insecurity. So often, we are made to feel less than. You're not devout enough. You're not faithful enough. You're not talented enough. You're not skilled enough. Jesus frees us from those stories we tell ourselves and that other people tell about us. We are freed from clinging to traditions that others use to make us feel inadequate or exclude us or make us feel unworthy of the calling God has placed on our lives.

And Jesus frees us to trust that the kingdom of God is present whenever we serve our neighbors by living out our vocations in the world. And because that comes from your heart, there is nothing that can keep you from doing that. To use the language of today's reading, there is nothing that can defile you, there is nothing someone can place on you, that can prevent you from reflecting the compassion of God in your life today just as you are right now.

And why do we do it? Not because you need to be better than others or because you need to prove your worth. No, but because, in Jesus, our hearts are always beating with the love of God.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

² "Opinion | Howard University's Removal of Classics Is a Spiritual Catastrophe," *Washington Post*, accessed August 25, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/04/19/cornel-west-howard-classics/>.