

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17) – Year B – September 2, 2009 - Homily
Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Psalm 45:1-2,7-10; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
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There's an old saying about how good fences make good neighbors. Back in the early '80s, Steve and I owned a house near Leeds in England. It had a nice back yard, which, unfortunately, was also adjacent to a public path. We put up a fence, because we were fed up with the neighbors - adults, children and assorted pets -- using our yard for a shortcut, and other things. The saying proved true: as soon as the fence was up, we found that our neighbors weren't quite so irritating, and we really could enjoy our yard. Having said that, I also know plenty of stories where a fence has proved to be an issue of deep contention between neighbors, especially about who owns it or who is responsible for repairing it when the property lines are not too clear.

Tonight's reading from the Gospel of Mark is about a couple of fences. These fences were erected by the Judean leaders from Jerusalem around "the traditions of the elders" and concerned matters of holiness and purity. All these issues were a big deal to the Pharisaic leaders. The traditions of the elders had been passed along from generation to generation, and over time, there was a certain amount of development as well. Observance of these ritual practices had become a source of pride for the Pharisees who kept these laws, and preached that others should too. Yet as we see in this passage from Mark, the ritual observances were also a means to judge others, and to keep others from 'proper' worship of God. In this final encounter of Jesus with his most outspoken critics from Jerusalem, we see Jesus, once again, correcting false interpretations of God's law and commandments over and against human precepts and traditions.

From either a Jewish or a Christian perspective, there is nothing essentially wrong with traditions. For example, our faith traditions include doctrinal statements like the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed; it is traditional to say the Lord's Prayer; to celebrate Holy Communion; as well as to teach the Gospel of salvation through faith by God's grace. However, look closely at what Jesus says to show the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. He quotes a portion of Isaiah, accusing His accusers of paying lip service to God's commandments. In fact, the problem Jesus is responding to in this passage is not tradition, but tradition alienated from the word of God. The problem was the major disconnect between the moral values espoused by the Pharisees and the actual behaviors they exhibited. In other words, they had begun to exalt ritual practices above the ethical demands of God's commandments and God's Word.

The Pharisees had erroneously come to believe that what made Israel acceptable to God was strict adherence to a set of ritual practices, especially around holiness and purity. The Hebrew Scriptures do express God's word on being holy as God is holy, and on expectations of purity. However, the Pharisees had taken God's commandment to be holy into their own hands. Their blindness was failing to see that becoming holy is not achieved by human rituals, like hand washing and dietary laws, but by obeying the intent of God's commandments through moral behaviors and attitudes. Jesus called them hypocrites, and their own actions spoke of that truth. The ritual demands were human precepts that burdened the people terribly and excluded many from the right to worship God in the Temple at Jerusalem. Jesus points out that that was never the intent of God's word. We all become hypocrites when we say one thing and do another, especially when we say that we love God, and then resist God's desire and calling on our lives. The word hypocrite comes from the Greek word, meaning actor. In the ancient Greek plays, the actors would wear masks to indicate the role they played, and it is true today of the deeper meaning of hypocrisy as it is a true definition of a Greek stage player. Hypocrisy is the opposite

of an authentic life. It is like putting on the mask and playing a role that has nothing to do with who we really are when the mask comes off. Our attitudes and behaviors speak volumes about what is going on in our hearts, and that is what God is interested in.

While I was listening to NPR recently, they aired a story about the cruelty of children. A teacher was giving an interview about a unique classroom experiment she had set up. Here's a summary of the issue as she observed it in her classroom of first graders. Whenever the children were asked to work together, there were always some who were excluded, or who did not seem to have any friends, for whatever reason. We all went to school. We all know how kids can be, and this kind of selective and exclusive behavior begins even before grade school. The teacher developed a new classroom rule that no one could say "no" if a child asked to join a group. Several of the more popular and outspoken children had serious doubts about how that rule could possibly work, and said that they didn't want any part of it. With the absolute honesty of young children, they told the teacher that they only wanted to be in a group with their friends, or they did not want to work with such and such, because they flat out didn't like them. The teacher stood firm and the children complied – some more graciously than others! In short, the children whose attitudes and behaviors were judgmental, bigoted, and hypocritical were challenged and unmasked. The children who had been excluded became part of any and each group they asked to join. At the conclusion of the news article, the teacher shared that even years later, former students still remembered the new rule and how life changing it was for them personally. The feedback came from both those who had had to change mean behaviors and attitudes, and from those who benefited from the new inclusiveness.

There are some good fences in our lives that help us to get along with the rest of the world, things like the rules of the road, laws against crime, and even the fences around our yards, if only to keep the dog in, or the deer out! Still, Jesus shows us that we too must challenge the kinds of fences that are based on bigotry or self-righteous exclusivism. These fences are the antithesis of God's commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves, and do not follow Jesus' boundary-breaking actions of inclusivity. Bigotry is just another word for racism or intolerance, prejudice or narrow-mindedness. It is a fence built around our own likes and dislikes, and our personal taboos. Theologian, Søren Kierkegaard once said, "Purity of heart is to will one thing." For Kierkegaard the one thing is the Good. If you and I put that into practice, to will the Good is to align our wills with God's will, just as our Savior Christ did. Let's think hard this week about our own fences. For example, let's answer the question of whom we would or would not invite to church? What rituals or traditions have become like proverbial 'sacred cows' in this community of faith, and do they really serve God? Who do we speak to at fellowship hour, and who do we avoid, and why? Is it because of a good fence, where we refuse to reward someone's bad behavior, like gossiping, or is it an exclusivist fence? At the end of this passage from Mark, Jesus makes it clear that it is our attitudes and behaviors that are really important to God, not the things we do to keep up appearances, and especially not the things we do that judge or oppress others. The good news is that Jesus died, once for all, to give life to the whole world. All who accept God's gift of faith through our Lord Jesus Christ are welcomed as beloved children of God. We may not always like our neighbors, but God's word demands that we must love them all as Christ loved us. No exclusions.

Amen.

