

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
Pentecost 14
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Michelle Cox

Focus on God

Pharisees.... what's the matter with them?

Jesus quoted Isaiah when they criticized his followers for not following long-held traditions. He called them hypocrites when he quoted:

“The people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain, teaching human rules instead of the commandment of God.”

I have some compassion for the Pharisees. They were members of an ancient Jewish sect that was distinguished by strict observance of tradition and Jewish law. They dedicated themselves to obeying and pleasing God.

Over the many, many years of their existence their dedication seems to have taken on an air of superiority and they began to think of themselves as smarter than everyone else.

The Pharisees wanted to obey God. I read that some of the laws of God given in the Old Testament, although detailed, are open to interpretation and in an attempt to give clear direction, the Pharisees established rules to follow.

Eventually these rules began to be viewed as if they were scripture. Their adherence to tradition had become as important to them as God's Will as told to them in the Torah.

The passage Jesus quoted from Isaiah also calls Christians to task today.

Being a Christian is about learning, about learning how to live as God wants us live. Jesus did a great deal of teaching and some of it is preserved for us in the New Testament, but like the teaching in the Old Testament, there is much that is left to our own discernment.

In Matthew 5:29 we read, “If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away”. Our own discernment of this verse tells us that Jesus is speaking figuratively not literally.

I believe it is important to understand why we do what we do when we worship together or at least strive to understand.

To that end, I've been digging into a question that has come up in our congregation in the past and just again more recently.

Where in the scriptures does it say that only a priest or bishop can distribute the Holy Eucharist on Sunday? I cannot find such a teaching in scripture.

I do find scripture that supports the Episcopal rule of only allowing a priest or bishop this honor and I believe the scriptures **strongly** support this rule.

In Acts 2:42 we read: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers..." and First Corinthians 11:17-26 also makes reference to the way in which the church remembers the Lord's instruction at the Last Supper and how the Church at Corinth is practicing that instruction in their corporate worship.

These verses support the importance of faithful and studied adherence to Jesus' teaching that, as we gather together to worship our Lord we do as he directed.

These scriptures do not tell us who is breaking the bread and serving the wine, but it is reasonable to expect that those doing so are the leaders or at least that it is done with the leadership's approval.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record the instruction given by Jesus at the Last Supper. Jesus was not speaking to a crowd or even to a large group of disciples. He gave this commission specifically to the apostles. It is the apostles who were charged with carrying out this commandment for the benefit of the community of faith, the community of faith that Jesus knew would grow up around them.

"Episcopal" means governed by or having bishops. We claim apostolic succession in that we trace our bishops back to the apostles.

Priests in our church are under the authority of their Bishop and it is a Bishop who ordains a priest. The liturgy appointed for The Ordination of a Priest is found on page 525 of the Book of Common Prayer.

The ordinand is asked by the Bishop:

“Will you be loyal to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of Christ as this Church has received them? And will you, in accordance with the canons of this Church, obey your bishop and other ministers who may have authority over you and your work? “

The ordinand answers:

“I am willing and ready to do so; and I solemnly declare that I do believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation; and I do solemnly engage to conform to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church.”

As the liturgy continues there is a point that the Bishop says: “You are to preach, to declare God’s forgiveness to penitent sinners, to pronounce God’s blessing, to share in the administration of Holy Baptism and in the celebration of the mysteries of Christ’s Body and Blood, and to perform the other ministrations entrusted to you.”

In this liturgy those standing before a bishop are committing themselves to a great deal. As they commit to solemnly engage to conform to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church.

That commitment assures the bishop, as much as humanly possible, that this person will consecrate the elements and engage in the communion of the Holy Eucharist with pure intent, pure intent that is in complete agreement with doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church.

I, for example or for that matter any lay person has not made such a commitment to a bishop. The laity serving as chalice bearers or as Eucharist ministers as they are often called are not required to complete the same level of examination and study as those who are presented for ordination as a priest, the examination and study that helps to assure the bishop that the person fully understands the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church.

The requirement of ordination for those presiding over the administration of the sacraments is found in many Christian faith traditions.

For example, this is from an explanation by the Christian Reformed Church: “... (Our understanding of) the true presence of the Holy Spirit in the Lord's Supper is significantly different than a Baptist, Lutheran, or Roman Catholic understanding of the same

sacraments. Therefore, according to our church order, the proper administration of the sacraments is done by one who is ordained.”

Transubstantiation is meaningful in our church. Transubstantiation in our church is the belief that the essence of Christ’s body and blood replace the substance of the bread and wine as they are consecrated, although the appearance of the bread and wine continues to be outwardly unchanged.

This is one of the differences we have from other Christian understandings of the Eucharist.

A consistent understanding is that we are to meet the Eucharist with a pure heart, free from conflict with others, free from condemnation of others. We are told to be reconciled to each other before we enter into communion.

It is my prayer that we will never confuse the rules and traditions we adhere to with the Word of God, that we will never take our rules and traditions as Gospel. That we will not follow in the Pharisees footsteps in this regard.

My point in all of this is that I believe our **rules** have been developed so we will get it right, so that we will never take the Eucharist lightly, so that every one of us, when we share communion know that our practice is consistent with the teaching Jesus has given us.

There are many other questions surrounding the Eucharist and other practices that I haven’t delved into for today. Questions like:

When is it okay for a lay person to take communion to someone who is unable to come to church,

Or how does the Episcopal idea of a three legged stool fit in,

Or why is it okay for a Lay Chalice Bearer to distribute the sacrament on Sunday when a Priest is present.

These are important questions, worthy of our study and discussion, study and discussion in which I hope we will engage at another time.

Today I am enriched to know the importance our faith tradition puts on this most solemn sacrament as we are all called to be in communion together.