

What Really Matters to God?

by Rev. Dr. Durrell Watkins
Sunshine Cathedral, 8/30/09
Mark 7.1-8, 14-15, 21-23

OK. Today's reading demonstrates why Mark's gospel is so captivating for me. Mark is no slave to tradition. Mark will not bow to any idol, not even those that are presented as fundamentals of the faith. Mark trusts his intellect and his intuition and his experience. He doesn't need outward trappings, rituals, and symbols to validate his spirituality. That doesn't mean there isn't a place for ritual and symbol, but that place, at least for Mark, is way below his own thinking and his own personal journey.

You know, I enjoy pageantry, and I believe that ritual helps messages sink into our deeper minds. I don't wear this robe because its magical, or even because I like long flowing garments (well, that's not the only reason). I wear it as a symbol that this hour is special and we are gathering in this hour to create sacred space. It is sacred...not because of candles or furniture or robes or any other symbol...its sacred because we who are loved by God gather together to celebrate and share that love. The robe is one of the calling cards to bring us together...beyond that, its just fabric.

But by living the church calendar, by worshiping regularly, by listening to a cycle of readings each year that presents a great deal of the bible to us, we are learning to live our faith. The tradition carries us in those moments when we don't seem to have the wherewithal to carry ourselves. I'm pretty low church, at times even iconoclastic, but I still enjoy and even depend on the rhythms and cycles of seasons and liturgy. I believe in the gathering together of the faithful so that we can discover that we are more together than we are apart, and so that we can share our strength when someone else is feeling a little low.

The rituals of worship however, are for us. They are tools that are meant to empower us, to lift us up, to give us hope and bring us together. Once we worship the symbol instead of the infinite Reality to which the symbol tries to point, once we worship the ritual instead of the ultimate Reality the ritual means to help us contact, then we have committed the mistake of idolatry and we have become prisoners of the tradition instead of contributors to the tradition.

Mark doesn't want us to fall into that trap. In today's Gospel reading Mark shows some religious leaders chastising Jesus because his disciples aren't following the rules. The religious tradition is very clear about what can and can't be eaten and how food is to be prepared and how the one eating is to prepare himself or herself. But Jesus thinks that people are more important than traditions, even traditions that wind up in scripture.

Jesus and his followers are always in trouble for healing on the Sabbath, which is considered work, which is a no-no according to the rules (and the keepers of the rules, who also wind up being the keepers of power strangely enough, are quick to quote chapter and verse to show that their interpretation of the rules is correct and must be followed without question). But Jesus heals on the Sabbath anyway.

When his disciples are hungry, they gather food on the Sabbath...now that is definitely work. But would God want them to go hungry because of what the calendar says? If today we are hungry and today there is food, guess what...today is the time to get some food regardless of what the calendar says. It just makes sense. So, Jesus' people would gather food on the Sabbath rather than starving on the Sabbath. People mattered more to Jesus than the fundamentals that served to keep some in power and others in line.

Almost 20 years before Mark is writing, St. Paul makes the same point about circumcision. People who grew up in Jewish families had their male children circumcised. People who grew up in Gentile homes did not usually practice circumcision. But there are scriptures that insist on male

circumcision as a sign of God's covenant with the people. So, the self-appointed religious hall monitors wanted all Gentiles who were interested in joining the Jesus movement to first convert to Judaism which for men would have included getting circumcised. The Apostle Paul said, "really? They can't support us, be part of us, unless they hurt themselves to satisfy a cultural norm?" Paul insisted that circumcision was not necessary to be a Christ-follower.

Several years after Mark is writing, Luke tells a story about St. Peter having a dream. In the dream God was telling him to eat food that the bible says is unclean. The Levitical texts forbid the eating of pork and shell-fish, among other tasty treats. In Peter's dream he sees every animal that he knows anything about. And he hears God saying, "slaughter these animals and eat." But Peter is stunned. He says, "Never! Some of these animals are unclean. I wouldn't think of eating them."

Later, Peter is called to the house of a centurion, a Gentile who had become interested in the Hebrew understanding of God but who had not converted to the faith. And Peter goes to that centurion's house because he finally understands what the dream was about. He tells the centurion, "It is unlawful in our tradition for a Jewish person to associate with a Gentile, but God has shown me that I should not consider any person unclean."

What Paul, and Mark, and Luke are all doing is disagreeing with the scriptures they have inherited. They know the verses. They also know that those verses might not have been meant for all people and for all time. They know that more than tradition and institutional interpretations, they might need to consider their particular location and circumstances and use their power of reason when making decisions. Rather than valuing rules more than relationships, rather than valuing law more than love, they might have to actually argue with their tradition and even reinterpret it or contribute something brand new to it, or even just disagree with it entirely.

We love scripture, but we mustn't worship it.

Now someone will say, "but isn't the bible the word of God?" We might call it the word of God, but the word of God is not God. Nor is it the final word of God. Guess what? God is still speaking, and God is speaking to and through us. God speaks through art, and through poetry, and through friendships, and through nature, and through the words that other religions call scripture. The bible is the word of God but not the final word. And, the bible is not only the word of God, it is also the word to God. It is a human attempt to understand God, to share God, to access God's grace and to praise God's goodness.

It is the word of God because it is the word about God. It is the dialogue of a people discussing God in the various ways they understood God. It isn't God dictating a message to us; it is people like us figuring out their relationship to God. They give us the legacy of their search to empower us to do our own search. We may even come to different conclusions than they did...and then our story becomes part of THE story that is the word of God.

Finally, let me say that the word of God is not a single word. There is the descriptive word and the prescriptive word. There is the word describing how things were, and the word prescribing how things out to be. When we read, "slaves obey your masters" or "wives submit to your husbands" we are reading how the world was; not how it ought to be. When we read, "Love your neighbor as yourself" and "do unto others as you would have others do unto you," we are reading how things aren't always, but definitely how they should be and can be. We must rightly divide the word, so that we discern between the descriptive word and the prescriptive word. People often use the descriptive word to promote the evils of the past, instead of embracing the prescriptive word that can heal those past mistakes and usher in God's kin-dom of love, justice, and inclusion here and now.

That's what Mark and Paul and Luke all have the nerve to demonstrate. They are showing us we need not be slaves to the opinions, prejudices or understandings of the past. We can honor the scriptures, but one way we honor them is to not reduce them to a rule book, a list of do's and don'ts, or a justification for our every petty prejudice. Our job isn't to worship the bible, but to

know it so that we can use it wisely for personal empowerment and liberation. God forbid that we ever use it as a tool of oppression again and God forbid that we ever allow it to be used as a tool of oppression against us.

That's why we hear Jesus saying today, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come..."

Yes you can quote a bible verse, and quote it accurately, saying we should wash a certain way, or not eat a certain kind of food, or do certain things on a certain day of the week...but why are you quoting those verses? To shame us? To control us? To limit us? That's not God! God is loving and life-giving and wants us to experience unfettered joy. What we eat, who we date, where we worship...these things aren't what matter to God. We are what matter to God. God isn't the moralizing, perfectionist super-ego wanting us to feel guilty for not following the party line. God is Eternity, the Source of all Life, perfect and endless Love, the giver of every good gift, the Web of Existence, the Whole of which we are each a part, the All-in-all.

Not having a certain ritual or symbol isn't what limits us...our thoughts and attitudes are what limit us. And God wants our thoughts and attitudes to be joyous, life-giving, positive. Because that's what God is; and that's what we are meant to be.

This is the Good News! Amen.

© Durrell Watkins 2009

**What is in my heart drives my life.
Let hope now fill my heart.
Let joy now fill my heart.
Let peace now fill my heart.
God is in my heart.
And God is what I express.
Amen.**