

**Pentecost 14 B, August 25, 2024**

**"Twelve inches from God"**

**Mark 7:1 – 13 and/or memorize: mark 7:8 NLT**

**Anybody watch the Olympics? What was the smallest difference of time in winning a race? That is correct, less than 1/100 of second. If you hold up your thumb and forefinger about 2 1/2 inches apart, that gives you an idea of the distance covered in 1/100th of a second in a 100-yard dash. Can you imagine that? It just astounded me. Some have said that success is measured in inches. This was certainly the case for the Olympics.**

**The tragic illustration of the crucial importance of little things was furnished a few years ago when a jet crashed shortly after takeoff. All 95 people were killed. An exhaustive study of the wreckage, determined that it was likely caused by a rudder – control system losing a bolt that was less than 1 inch long. For want of that one-inch bolt, 95 lives were lost.**

**If success is measured in inches, think about this. The distance between the lips and the heart is approximately 12 inches. In our Gospel reading, Jesus was chastising the religious leaders of His day and He quotes the words of Isaiah: "These people worship with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." On the lips, but not in the heart. A fatal distance of less than 12 inches.**

**These are the same people who Paul complained about as having the "form of godliness, but not the power." The religious leaders considered themselves among the most pious people who ever lived. The problem was, their faith was all form with no power; all ceremony and no personal experience; all on the lips and very little in their hearts. Such religion always shows itself in blatant hypocrisy and blind insensitivity.**

**So, what's the big problem here in our Gospel reading? The Pharisees were complaining to Jesus because the disciples did not perform the ceremonial cleansing required before eating their meals. Let me be clear on this, it's not that they went to the bathroom and didn't wash their hands before eating.**

**What the Pharisee's were complaining about was that the disciples didn't follow the custom of pouring a little bit of water over their hands, before eating their meals, to signify that they were clean. It had nothing to do with hygiene and everything to do with a show.**

**This was one of the ceremonial and cultural traditions that the Pharisees believed were vital to the life of Israel. It was a tradition and traditions were important to the Jews, because it reminded them of God's saving action in history.**

**Unfortunately, tradition had grown to such importance that the meaning behind the ritual was obscured, and religion had become strictly an outward show. As people who practice a liturgical style of worship, it is an issue we want to be aware of also. It's just as easy for us, as it was for the Pharisees, to emphasize form over faith.**

Every once in a while, when I'm away and we have another pastor here, someone will tell me that he didn't do it the way I do it. As if the way I do it is the only way to do it. We want to be careful about that. We're going to have a new pastor someday. He's going to do things differently than I do them. He's not wrong in doing them that way. It may be that he was taught or prefers a different way of doing something, so we don't want to make judgments on him or his actions, or else we will be in danger of being just like the Pharisees

Jesus says of them, "This people worship me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me . . ." **It is a temptation to substitute religious or cultural traditions for Jesus. We worship a living Lord, not dead tradition.**

Czar Nicholas of Russia discovered a soldier guarding a patch of weeds on the palace grounds. He asked the guard why he was there and was told that the captain of the guards had ordered him to stand there. When questioned, the captain said it was the law. A search of the archives revealed that Catherine the Great had planted a rosebush on that spot and a guard was posted there to protect it. The rose had long since died, but the law remained and the guard stood.

Someone wisely said that the seven last words of any church are: "We never did it that way before." The rose had long since died, but the law remained and the guards stood. Let us always be careful about speaking those seven last words, because they can lead to the death of a congregation.

**God is continuously trying to say something fresh to His people. We cannot afford a faith that elevates form over faith. The Pharisees loved the traditions. It was such a threat to them that in order to prevent it, they crucified God's only Son. That is what happens when people simply go through the motions, when they're living a second-hand faith. A second-hand faith, is a faith lived without the thought of God's call.**

A second-hand faith, serves only when there is no danger, but sooner or later, like the Czar, someone will ask why. Why do you perform a ceremony of cleansing the outside of the hand when a man is corrupt on the inside? Sooner or later, it will no longer be sufficient to say, "That is the way our fathers did it!" Tradition is a common substitute for real faith.

Another substitute for real faith can be respectability or perhaps we might call it morality. I was at a party with a girlfriend many, many, many, many, many years ago. Her cousin walked over to me and asked if I was a liberal or conservative? It came out of left field and I wasn't quite sure what the question was about, so I asked her to help me understand it.

She said, "Well, I'm a Baptist. My church teaches that you shouldn't smoke, you shouldn't drink and you shouldn't play cards." At the moment that she was talking to me, she had a cigarette hanging from her lips, she was grabbing a beer, so that she could go play cards. I looked at her and said, "Based on that definition, I guess I would have to say to you, I'm a liberal. My church doesn't tell me I can't do any of those things, but I don't do them."

A theologian once said, "Too often we tend to define Christianity in negative ways. A Christian is someone who pays strict attention to not doing a good many things. I know of a professor who told of one who did not do this and did not do that. He asked his class if they thought he or she was a Christian? They agreed the person was likely a Christian because they had most of the characteristics of a Christian. Then the professor said, 'I was describing my neighbor's dog'"

A third behavior that often mimics authentic commitment is good works. Two men were earnestly disputing the relative importance of faith and works when they came to a ferry over a river. This was in olden days and the ferry was actually a boat that was rowed. As they started across the river, they asked the ferryman's opinion. Was it faith alone, or works by themselves, that represented Christian duty or Christian Hope.

For an answer, the good ferryman pointed to his two oars. "One," he said "I will call faith, the other works. If I pull only on faith I get nowhere, but just go around in a circle. If I pull only on works, it is the same way. But when I pull on both faith and works together, then the ferry moves across the river."

Don't misunderstand me, good works are important, just as tradition and morality are. They are essential elements of our faith, but they are only the outward manifestations of an inward experience. Without that connection, we are just going through the motions, but we don't know why. The Christian faith is a dynamic, living relationship with God through His Son, Jesus.

There is a story about a spider that started to build a new web high in the rafters of a barn. The web was a long way from the insects' regular paths. Soon, however, the web fell into the barn, where the spider lived a rich life on the insects that got caught in his web.

**One day, he noticed a single silver thread, reaching up as far as he could see. Feeling that the cord was useless, the spider clipped it and his whole life collapsed into a heap on the floor. This is what happens to us when we feel that the web of tradition and respectability are sufficient and forget the thread of faith, reaching up to connect us to Jesus.**

**Our faith must always be connected to Jesus, who came from heaven, lived our life, died our death, and rose again. Without that connection, we will have only a dead faith rather than a live one. Jesus is the Lord of both the living and the dead, but He came so that we might have life eternal. That life only happens by our connection to Jesus. Never let us forget that.**

**Count me in: What will you do to share your connection to Jesus with others?**