

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. David Pettit
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Mark 7: 1-8, 14-23

I wore brown crocs to an interview once. I did not get the job. More so, my wife and her friend Kate will never forget or let go of that decision of mine. I'm still not certain it was a terrible decision. The job was in Pine Plains, NY. I figured the rural environment meant a more relaxed approach to decorum and dress and all that. After all, I grew up in the western Finger Lakes of New York, and decorum was not the highest value there. But authenticity was. Blue jeans with a buck knife and work boots may be the interview choice – because there it is more about being true to oneself, letting the other know who you are and that you are not going to change for them.

Holly says you should wear blue to an interview, because blue is trustworthy. I can't defend the science behind that, but I do often wear blue to interviews, especially given the croc incident. Maybe if they were blue crocs?!

I suppose we could say that judging someone on their dress or decorum is all vain, pointless, or unfair. But we know that is not entirely true. I remember meeting Hudson's first-grade teacher, who looked not a day over nineteen. But, she shook my hand with a serious grip and looked me straight in the eye, and smiled brightly. She was confident, was not intimidated by me one bit, and I remember thinking that we had nothing to worry about. She would handle Hudson just fine, and she and Hudson got along brilliantly.

A good handshake says a lot. As does one's posture and how one carries oneself or cares for oneself. For there is a relationship between inner qualities and character, and how a person carries themselves. The outer can be a reflection of the inner. That is why you should make a good first impression; why you should dress your best for a job interview, because an interview committee may not believe that a sloppily dressed, poorly postured person may be the best employee.

Well, my point is that there is an important relationship between inner character, or spiritual qualities, and how we act in our bodies, and how we position our bodies, dress our bodies. Posture communicates a lot. A lot has been made in recent years as to appropriate posture during the national anthem. Most of that is politicized nonsense, but we do know that our chosen posture can express our thoughts and commitments, our reverence and respect. You are supposed to bow your head in prayer, for it connotes or helps to effect an inner state. Outer and inner connected. The body's posture reflects the posture (or desired posture) of the heart or the

mind. While I have not served in the armed forces myself, I think that all the uniforms, saluting, and ceremonies are not just empty traditions but are part of the discipline, part of how posture and decorum may reflect or shape one's character.

In some traditions, you bow, or kneel, or make the sign of the cross, or genuflect. In the tradition of the Old Testament and in Jewish tradition, you wear phylacteries on your body that remind you of the law. You wash yourself. You wash utensils and sacrificial animals, and so on. This connection between outer and inner is even more so in the Biblical tradition, for there is more of a holistic view of life – little divide between the physical and the spiritual. You act out reverence and love for God in the everyday matters of existence – what you eat, even in the washing of your hands.

This is why the scribes and Pharisees, who are the bastions of the law and faith, are upset at the scene that unfolds. They come from Jerusalem, the big city, the religious center of the people, and they come out here to the sticks, to these small villages of hard-working people, and they are disturbed by the informality that they see. They perceive irreverence amongst Jesus' disciples. Laxness; the disciples don't seem to show honor or care.

The Pharisees believe love of God is shown through adherence to ceremonial cleanness. So, they are disturbed when they sit down to a banquet and they notice Peter and Andrew walking straight in from the boat, still smelling of fish, scales still under their fingernails, and they sit down to eat. They see fingerprints on the dishes, crumbs on the floor, their elbows stick to the table. There are even women sitting among them, talking to the teacher. And when the food comes, they are left to wonder what kind of rural aberration this is. Under what health code violations was it cooked? Are they the only ones to notice the crassness and unseemliness? And is Jesus, this rabbi, going to address this defilement? Surely if this rabbi is responsible and reverent and trustworthy, he will pass on the traditions so that the Love of God might be evidenced.

But Jesus does not confront his people. Jesus is familiar with the tradition and the cultural norms that these teachers and law-keepers reference, but he pushes back. And instead of confronting his followers, and instead of making a big deal about outward cleanness and reverence and respect, he confronts the Pharisees and the Scribes. Now Jesus should know that the Pharisees and the Scribes have an important case. Because the inner and the outward are connected. We reflect and shape our inner character through outward actions. And yet, Jesus knows that this correlation is not perfect.

There is often a breakdown. We are all well versed in the fact that someone can stand tall, smile, shake your hand, all while lying to your face. We are all familiar with the tradition of smiling big, acting cheerful, and hiding the darker realities of how we are feeling, or what we are thinking. We all know that one can be so adamant for the right things, that they become controlling or angry or compulsive, that we can become the things we hate. One can mouth the words of the liturgy, but have our minds in another place. And sometimes it is the one who does not interview well that is the best employee. The inner and the outer do not always correlate.

And so, Jesus confronts the situation. He suggests that the law and the customs had become so entrenched and assumed, but they stopped reflecting or shaping inner lives. He suggests that attention to the heart and to the mind, to motives and sincerity, had been lost or obscured. The focus had just become whether one followed the letter of the law. The outer was no longer reflecting or shaping the inner. And so, Jesus privileges the importance of inner realities, instead of privileging the importance of the outer. Jesus quotes Isaiah, “This people honors me with their lips,” the outer, “but their hearts are far from me,” the inner.

So rather than harping on his followers to listen to him about washing their hands and guarding against letting any uncleanness enter the body, he turns the focus on paying attention to what comes out. Not in a sense that one might be disqualified or removed from the community for it – but for the purpose of paying attention to the real impurity and uncleanness that ought to be addressed. This is the uncleanness that warrants attention and addressing. Jesus turns to a different type of scrutinizing – scouring the heart, motives, hurts, pain, and things like shame and pride.

Instead of focusing on the impure that may enter one’s body, he focuses on the impure that comes out, and that what comes out is what actually reflects our hearts, minds, and spirits. What comes out when you are stuck in traffic and need to be somewhere, and somebody cuts you off? What comes out when you are lost in an unfamiliar place? What comes out when you smash your finger in the drawer, or when your child ignores you for the umpteenth time, or someone makes a demeaning comment? What comes out in times of stress and uncertainty? What comes out when you look at old pictures and find yourself lonely and still grieving? What comes forward when you are alone and walking among people of other cultures and skin colors, or even when you are reading the headlines of the news? What comes forth? Is it the fruit of the Spirit, that is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and self-control? Or is it fear, and anger, and insecurity, and resentment, and frustration, and a loss of control, and things of the like?

In my Young Life days, we had a saying. It went like this: “a teenager isn’t likely to remember that great talk (sermon) you gave; but they will remember how you react when they spill their milkshake on the front seat of your car.” For in such moments, our attempts at being all put together and reverent are subverted by the flood of what is beneath – by the true uncleanness of our hearts. The assumption is that they will know if you are authentic in those moments.

And so Jesus confronts the way that the focus on the law has obscured the spiritual. “Listen to me,” he said, “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.” You see, he swings the pendulum in the opposite direction of what the Pharisees and Scribes had emphasized. But the question is, what does he expect them and us to do with this information?

This brief passage kind of just ends. I mean Jesus makes a good fight out of it. He gets in the Pharisees’ grill, and he lets them know that they are no better than the dirty handed disciples sticking their hands in the common tray of food. But what is the point other than to highlight everyone’s faults and shortcomings. What do we do once we are firmly aware of our inner uncleanness that comes rushing forth when triggered in a variety of ways? Most of us don’t like our issues dragged into the light of day, so what is Jesus getting at. So what is the point? Now what?

I think that this moment draws attention to the difference between the religious leaders' approach and Jesus’ approach. The approach the religious leaders had always taken was to avoid the unclean. It is one of the myths that their practices had propped up. The myth is that we can avoid the unclean. Jesus reminds them it is not that simple. One can avoid the unclean foods, but that does not mean that uncleanness and sinfulness do not live in our hearts. Jesus, on the other hand, who is hanging out with unkempt croc wearing types, obviously has not taken the approach of avoiding what is unclean. Instead, he is eating with them, and receiving hospitality from them.

Jesus’ approach is different. He does not avoid the unclean. But he touches the unclean. He dignifies the unclean person, and he lifts the shame. Think of the man with leprosy. Jesus did not avoid him, but touched him. Jesus does not pull away or condemn, or put requirements on people that they cannot fulfill. A lame person cannot wash themselves into cleanness, because they are unwhole according to the law. The law cannot make this person whole, it can only condemn. So Jesus does not pull away from them, nor does he condemn. He touches them. He heals, restores, and dignifies. His approach to redeeming our hearts and all that which comes out is to offer a gentle touch, and grace.

The real path towards wholeness is grace and forgiveness. Now the place where Jesus gets a little fierce and condemning is towards those that one, try to deny their own inner sinfulness and need of grace and forgiveness, and two, who condemn and demean others, rather than offering grace and forgiveness. But apart from these moments when Jesus is tangling with the religious establishment, he offers love and forgiveness and grace and a gentle touch. He heals, he lifts burdens rather than adding burdens.

And so what do we do when all our inner uncleanness gets brought to the surface? We can hide it, or deny it, or dress it up. Or we receive Jesus' touch, grace, love, and forgiveness. Because until we receive that, we cannot start to be well. We will not become the people we want to be until we receive grace in the place of our brokenness. That's what Jesus really means by uncleanness here. It is where sin and the brokenness of humanity has left its mark on our hearts and souls.

I suppose that is why we may push back on formality at times. We want to be accepted for who we are. It is why I'm still tempted to where crocs to an interview. We want to be seen and accepted for who we are. It is why Jesus does not condemn his followers, but eats with them, and stays at their houses, and calls them friends. Because that willingness to be in relationship and accepted is the far greater religious action. It is only forgiveness and love and grace that heal the marks of brokenness and sin. And when forgiveness and grace has done its work, its possible that over time the inner and the outer may start to align again, that we might come to love the Lord with all our hearts, mind and strength, that we might come to love our neighbor as ourselves, that we might be whole, and we might be known.

And all God's children said...

The Tradition of the Elders

(Mt 15:1–20)

⁷ Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, ² they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. ³ (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴ and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) ⁵ So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” ⁶ He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

‘This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;

⁷ in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

⁸ You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

¹⁴ Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

¹⁷ When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸ He said to them, “Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, ¹⁹ since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰ And he said, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. ²¹ For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²² adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”