***VITAL ORGANS***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

August 30, 2015

Texts: Psalm 51:1-2, 10-12 and Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 17-23

Every year I learn something new from our Nursery School children in our chapel time. Usually I share a Bible story or something akin to a Children’s Message, though unlike the Children’s Messages here I do not have a whole congregation around me silently rooting for the children! In one of those chapel sessions I was telling the story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden. I told them about the wonderful garden that had luscious fruits and good things with only one rule – don’t eat the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden. Then one of the kids spoke up. “I know why they weren’t supposed to eat the apple from the tree,” he said. “You do?” I responded. “Yes,” he said as if I should know this as well. “God told them not to eat the apple because it hadn’t been washed.” “Oh yeah!” replied some of the others, as if it all suddenly made sense. Not surprisingly they had spent the morning learning about the importance of washing fruit before eating it – a lesson they obviously learned well!

The Pharisees and Scribes in Jesus’ day may or may not have agreed with the boy’s analysis of the Creation Story, but they would have approved of the emphasis on washing the fruit! As you heard from that passage in Mark, the Pharisees were fastidious about washing their hands and the food they brought home from the market and all their cups, pots, and bronze kettles. Perhaps they were the first to utter that old adage – *Cleanliness is next to godliness* – for their concern was not just hygienic but also religious. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures there are a host of rules about food – rules about what can be eaten and not eaten (no pork or shellfish), rules about preparation of foods (don’t boil a kid in its mother’s milk), and rules about washing before eating. There were good reasons for some of the rules. In a culture in which people ate with their hands, washing before eating was pretty important. The rules were not given with a rationale about preventing the spread of disease or bacteria or high cholesterol; they were presented simply as the law of the Lord.

For the Pharisees keeping the law was vital to pleasing God. They were far more concerned with the letter of the law than the spirit of the law, and to preserve that letter of the law they practiced ritual traditions that went beyond those specified in Scripture. Ritual washing was among those traditions. It was concern for obedience to those rituals more than to the law itself that led them to criticize Jesus’ disciples: “Why do they not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”

It is hard to imagine people of faith getting so caught up with their traditions that failure to observe them could become a point of controversy! Right? In his novel *Hawaii*, James Michener tells of protestant missionaries from New England who arrived in Hawaii to share the Gospel with the island people. Right away the missionaries saw a problem – the people were naked! So wrapped up were they in their tradition that they could not unwrap the Gospel from the black wool in which it was cloaked! Some of you remember Blue Laws that forbade a host of activities on Sundays – some of which, though not all, may be violated at the Covenant Fellowship gathering at the Woodlands this evening. Those Blue Laws became laws unto themselves. One of my seminary professors, a world renowned New Testament scholar, was working in his garden one sunny Sunday afternoon when a neighbor called out, “Mr. Achtemeier, you shouldn’t be working on the Sabbath. You should be reading your Bible.” To which he replied, “Mrs. Smith, reading the Bible is my work! This is my Sabbath!”

Too many church conflicts are rooted, not in some deep theological or biblical dispute, but in the tension between old traditions and a new way of doing things – the kind of music to be sung or the translation of the Bible to be read or the brand of grape juice for communion or the color of the carpet in the sanctuary. There is something comfortable about doing things as they’ve always been done, but there is also something exciting about trying something new. As a church that is Reformed, rooted in the Reformed tradition of the 16th century, but also being re-formed by the Spirit to respond to the changing world in which we live, we try to discern what God wants us to do – sometimes holding on to traditions of the past and sometimes following the Spirit on a new path – but always seeking to be faithful to who God would have us be at this time in this place. We have been blessed to have navigated those waters without too many ripples in this congregation across the years, but the challenges remain as the world changes and faith grows and the Spirit moves us and new generations arrive with new ideas.

For the Pharisees and scribes there was no room for new ideas or deviation from the tradition of the elders. They expected all good Jews to follow their example and abide by the traditions of the elders to which they were heirs, which included ritual washing. Now maybe some of the disciples were slobs or with so many fishermen among them perhaps they were used to eating among the fish guts without taking time for ceremonial washing. But apparently the disciples did not practice the tradition of the elders when it came to washing, and the Pharisees and scribes suspected they did so with the approval of Jesus. If so, then Jesus was setting himself above the elders whose traditions the Pharisees cherished.

Jesus’ response was that the scribes and Pharisees were focused on the wrong vital organ. They were concerned about dietary laws and traditions related to the stomach, but neglected God’s laws related to the heart. They followed the rules when it came to food, but failed to follow God’s commandments about mercy and compassion. They worried about the practice of ritual washing of their hands when what they needed was the cleansing of their hearts. They had reduced faithfulness to a set of human rules to be followed, rather than obeying the overarching law of love upon which the law and prophets were based. Jesus then turned from the Pharisees to the crowd and told them, “What defiles you is not what goes into your stomach, but what comes out of your heart.”

You can’t reduce faith to a tidy set of rules to be followed – a simple list of do’s and don’ts that make you a faithful disciple:

Do go to church on Sunday. Don’t go to the brothel on Monday.

Do put a dollar into the offering plate. Don’t steal a dollar out of the offering plate. (One outfielder on my Little League team had a problem with that one.)

Do pray from time to time. Don’t swear any time.

Do take and eat the bread at communion. Don’t take and eat the last pork chop at the dinner table.

It is not that any of those do’s and don’ts are wrong or not worth following, but we should not think ourselves righteous and faithful because we can check off the do’s and don’ts on the list. The list of things God wants us to do is more difficult – do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God. Forgive as you have been forgiven! Love your neighbor. When can you ever check those items off the list as well done?

Remember the rich man who came to Jesus asking what he must do to inherit eternal life? Jesus ticked off the list of do’s and don’ts in the commandments and the man said, “All these I have done since my youth.”

“Then do one thing more,” said Jesus. “Sell all you own, give it to the poor, and follow me.” But the man could not do that for, the text says, he had many possessions. He wanted a list of things to do and not do, things he could do or not do from the comfort of his comfortable home. But Jesus told him that faithfulness begins with the heart and until he unloaded his wealth and gave his heart wholly to God, he could not expect to enter God’s kingdom.

Faith and faithfulness begin with the most vital organ among vital organs – not with the stomach and what we eat or drink

or with the brain and grasping great theological concepts

or with the tongue in saying just the right things.

Faith and faithfulness begin with the heart, with loving God enough to love our neighbors and to obey God’s commandments and to follow wherever God leads us. The scary part is that God knows our hearts, knows the intentions that underlie our actions, knows the loves we harbor there, knows us as we really are not as we want to be known. Run down the list of evils Jesus names – sex for sport, stealing, killing, cheating, coveting, deceiving, lying – all of those come from hearts that love something more than God. Perhaps it is wealth or pleasure or self, but something lays claim to the heart above God and so leads to destructive behaviors rooted in what Jesus describes as “evil intentions”.

It is for that reason that the psalmist prays, “*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me*.” The psalm is described as David’s plea after the prophet Nathan indicted him for adultery with Bathsheba. It was only then that David recognized his heart was unclean and needed cleansed of all those wicked loves that distracted him from love of God and directed him to lust for Bathsheba. It should not take such an indictment for us to recognize that our hearts are unclean – full of wrongly directed loves, misplaced priorities, and layers of self-righteous tradition that need to be washed away to make way for whole-hearted love for God. Jesus urges us to let go of all those other loves with the promise of forgiveness, to let the waters of baptism wash them away, and to let God enter in. That is where faith begins – in the heart. And so we pray: Create in us clean hearts, O God – clean hearts! Amen