

Nothing (or Moving Fences)

I'm thinking of a word. I wonder if you can guess what it is. I'll give you some clues. 1.) The word has seven letters. 2.) It preceded God. 3.) It's greater than God. 4.) The poorest of the poor have it. 5.) Wealthy people need it. 6.) If you eat it, you will die. 7.) It's what you can do to make God love you more. 8.) It's what you can do to make God love you less. 9.) It's what can separate us from the love of God in Christ. Any guesses? Think about it for a bit. Did you get it? Give up? The answer? The word I'm thinking of is NOTHING. Nothing has seven letters. Nothing preceded God. Nothing is greater than God. The poorest of the poor have nothing. Wealthy people need nothing. If you eat nothing, you will die. There is nothing you can do to make God love you more. There's nothing you can do to make God love you less. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8).

In our Gospel reading today we meet some Pharisees and scribes who seem to have forgotten this (except for the last point – they don't yet know who Jesus is). They're like the Temple security guards. They're responsible for guarding the purity of the religion. They're getting hung up on rules. These rules seem urgent to them but they are missing what is important. It's not that the law is *not* important. The law is a gift. That's what our first reading is about. The Israelites had been slaves in Egypt. Moses led them out of slavery into freedom. But they were wandering in the wilderness and their lives were in chaos. Unmanageable. God gave them the law as a covenant of love, to order their lives as God's people. Their observance of the law was a witness to the nations around them, to give glory to God, to be, in effect, a loving response to the love that was first shown to them.

When we meet the Pharisees and some scribes today, generations later, they are taking this calling to be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation very seriously. Priests serving in the temple are required to wash their hands before entering the holy place or offering a sacrifice. And the Pharisees believe that all Jews, then, should wash their hands before meals as a way of making *mealtimes* sacred. (The fact that this was also good hygiene was a bonus.) The good intention was to bring every aspect of life under the canopy of God's wonderful law.

The religious leaders developed "traditions of the elders." Upholding these traditions was a way to "build a fence around the law." It was a way to preserve the Jewish faith and way of life, especially in the midst of a country now occupied by the Roman army. It was an identity thing. It gave them something to DO that would express who they are. So when the Pharisees and scribes see Jesus' disciples eating with *unwashed* hands, they are taken aback. They see carelessness and disrespect. Jesus has moved the fence.

So what's up with Jesus? Why would Jesus get so irritated when the temple security guards call him on his disrespect for the rules? Well, Jesus sees how the use of the law has been distorted. The law and the traditions of the elders have become an end in and of themselves and not the *means* to an end, as was God's original intention. That intention was all about relationships with God and one another. The use of the law has deteriorated, into a vehicle for gatekeeping and control, as a means to create insiders and outsiders. And that's why Jesus moves the fence.

Then Jesus makes a point that none of us wants to hear. He explains where evil comes from. It's not about the externals, like washing hands or cups or pots or even bronze kettles. It's not about disobeying these human made rules. It's about the internals. Evil comes from within – from within all those people who bug you, all those people you can't control. AND it also comes from within you. And me. You and me and the Pharisees and scribes have something to learn from Jesus and from the old comic strip Pogo: We have met the enemy, and it is us.

The line between good and evil runs through the middle of every human heart. That is something the humble and Honorable John McCain knew and understood and lived. He owned his imperfections. That is something the Roman Catholic Church is learning in a shameful, embarrassing way on a very public stage after decades of suppressing horrible crimes. No one is immune. That is something we *all* need to comprehend – and own -- in

this polarized climate where finger pointing and blame eclipse any sense of personal responsibility, and where finger pointing and blame erode any hope of accomplishing something positive together for the common good.

It is human nature to receive the gifts of God but then distort them until we end up using them as vehicles for our own purposes, often to bind, subconsciously, to bind anxiety and fear. Pharisees and scribes did that with the law, and then came Jesus – not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. The church did that with tradition and we had the Protestant Reformation. Then Protestants did that with the Bible. We isolated certain Bible verses, removed them from their context in the whole of Scripture and in relationship to the teachings of Jesus, and used them to support gatekeeping agendas, from slavery, to the oppression of women, to the exclusion of LGBTQ brothers and sisters. The Episcopal Church seeks to avoid that inevitable human tendency by putting forth a principle known as the three-legged stool: to balance scripture, tradition and reason – not one but all three. But in order to engage in reason, one has to engage in relationship, to have conversations, to understand each other: how your story, my story and God’s story intersect. To be open to the work of the Spirit, who might just move that fence.

“No one can make himself pure by obeying laws,” says one of my spiritual mentors, Oswald Chambers. “Jesus Christ does not give us rules and regulations—He gives us His teachings which are truths that can only be interpreted by His nature which He places *within* us. The great wonder of Jesus Christ’s salvation is that He changes our heredity. He does not change human nature—He changes its source, and thereby its motives as well.”¹ This reminds me of the prophet Jeremiah’s words about the new covenant that was to come, what Christians know in Jesus, where God’s laws will be written on our hearts. (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

During World War I, a Protestant chaplain with the American troops in Italy became a friend of a local Roman Catholic priest. In time, the chaplain moved on with his unit and was killed. The priest heard of his death and asked military authorities if the chaplain could be buried in the cemetery behind his church. Permission was granted. But the priest ran into a problem with his own Catholic Church authorities. They were sympathetic, but they said they could not approve the burial of a non-Catholic in a Catholic cemetery. They had to follow the rules. So the priest buried his friend just outside the cemetery fence. Years later, a war veteran who knew what had happened returned to Italy and visited the old priest. The first thing he did was to ask to see the chaplain’s grave. To his surprise, he found the grave inside the fence. “Ah,” he said, “I see you got permission to move the body.” “No,” said the priest. “They told me where I could not bury the body. But nobody ever told me I could not move the fence.”

Today God in Jesus invites the saint and sinner in each of us to join the saint and sinner John McCain at our Lord’s table of grace, where our great God in Jesus is doing it once again: moving the fence, even for you, even for me. Because there is nothing we can do to make God love us any more, and there is nothing we can do to make God love us any less, and nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest: Traditional Updated Edition*

Elisabeth Johnson, Commentary on Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23, Working Preacher

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3758

Matt Skinner, Commentary on Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23, Working Preacher

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1381

Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*, Zondervan, 1997