



TOUCH POINT

Gospel Unshackled – Touchpoint for August 28, 2024

Mark 7:1-8; Mark 7:14-15; Mark 7:21-23 (NRSVUE) **The Tradition of the Elders**

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 wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders, ⁴ and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash, and there are also many other traditions that they observe: the washing of cups and pots and bronze kettles and beds.) ⁵ So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not walk 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.”

²¹ For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²² adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, debauchery, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

Grace and peace to you from the Mystery in whom we live and move, and have our being.

I don't even know how to begin to describe the thrill I experience when I read these confrontational yet freeing words of Jesus. He is liberating the soul of humanity from the mind-numbing burden of obsessive-compulsive rituals of religious authorities. Inner spiritual intimacy had no place in a kingdom ruled by outward policies and procedures.

It's like the young Forrest Gump fitted with leg braces designed as a corrective device for walking. Forrest could walk with the braces, but he could never run. As he began to run from his bullies, his friend, Jenny, yells “Run Forrest, Run!” Hearing her compassionate and strong voice fading, he drags those braces until they can no longer restrict him. The metal contraptions begin to dismantle and fall to the ground. They may have served a purpose at one time, but they have outlived their usefulness.

In the same way maybe Jesus is telling all of his followers to “Run people, run!” Run from those things which confine us.

It's so frightening to leave what appears to bind us in our communities of faith. There is attachment in a religious community and an ordered way of life. To rid ourselves of the spiritual co-dependent thinking intended to serve Christ seems wrong. So often the conscious and unconscious creeds form our identity, and the doctrines grip our lives and restrict our strides. Basic life commandments are turned into moral obligations to be regulated by the defined specifics created by the scribes. It's not the commandments they are questioning Jesus about, it's the traditions of the elders.

“So, the Pharisees and the experts in the law asked him, “Why do your disciples not conduct themselves as the tradition of the elders prescribe...?”

The “traditions” were developed long after the Pentateuch and the Ten Commandments and well before Jesus’s time. They were laws defined in such specific and taxing ways that they moved the relationship of loving God to loving the perfection of duty. For most, I can only assume that such traditions were followed to gain God’s pleasure through pious traditions.

When Jim Hanson listens to my messages, he says, “Henry, you are so Lutheran!” I respond, “I am not Lutheran.” Jim says my obsession with the message of belonging, without caveat, is deeply Lutheran. My question then is, “Why the Creeds?” Why does much of the liturgy still embrace statements of doctrinal definitions originating from the traditions of the elders? Weren’t they designed to separate the faithful from religious heretics? Jim responds by saying, “I’m not talking about the institution, I’m talking about the way of seeing God’s grace. It’s Lutheran.” Maybe there is Lutheran in me, and I’m just experiencing church trauma.

You see, once we run far from the “old-time religion” and its exclusive interpretations, we tend to develop an aversion to anything that feels like a religious orthotic designed to support cathedrals built on falling arches.

Perhaps I’m not in step with the severely burdensome and tedious traditions set forth by past and modern experts of the law. But I don’t see myself as a lone ranger. I am part of a great community within diverse interpretations of specificity that are not going to hold me back from internal devotion and freedom. I am not a lone ranger. I guess that does make me Lutheran in philosophical terms.

In 2010, I was told by a pastor friend of a non-denominational church that I wanted to be a “lone ranger.” It broke my heart and pissed me off all at the same time. I was a regular pulpit filler there, but my friend did not see my longing to be a part of his guys. I couldn’t fit in. I did not adhere to their traditions. I did not align with their Calvinistic traditions held by a few of the founders. I did not like to smoke cigars and drink expensive whiskey in the back yard of John’s house. I did not believe only the good ol’ boys should be church leaders. But I loved them and the community. I loved the vibe of grace. But... my interpretations did not belong. I was a double-divorcee and single for twenty years prior. I dated a woman a lot younger than me. I began openly affirming LGBTQ rights. The community loved it, but the more I preached about inclusive grace, the more the leadership apparently had unspoken judgments about me. That’s when John invited me to lunch and he said, “Henry, I can’t get past you wanting to be a lone ranger.” I felt unseen. The truth was, it was more a feeling of apprehension, shyness, and my concerns about their kind of grace.

After this I decided to speak my truth. By modern descriptions of what it means to be an evangelical Christian, I was a hypocrite. I’d had enough of being told I wasn’t Christian enough.

As a young man, I left the Presbyterian Church of my youth and was indoctrinated with the evangelical, sinner-winning traditions of the elders circa 1965-2000. They claimed to represent what the majority of American Christians believed. It’s not what I was taught as a young, liberal Presbyterian. I was taught all people belonged. Love and community were everything. It rooted me as a teen in youth group. But then Campus Crusade told me it wasn’t enough, Four-Square gospel told me Campus Crusade wasn’t enough. Open Door Fellowship told me neither one was enough. I was literally told, in the guise of grace and love, that I needed to decide if I wanted to give permission to have the leadership of Open Door’s protection. Holy Corleone!

I decided to put my heart on paper, so I wrote and published on social media a personal manifesto called “Leaving Christianity, Following Jesus.” I was shunned from that dear little beloved fellowship ironically called “Open Door Fellowship.” ODF took pride that all people, no matter their place in life, were welcomed with open arms from the pulpit. It was a safe place for the awkward and the raw. It was alluring.

I once assured a woman I knew that she and her (same sex) partner would be welcomed at ODF. Months after they began participating, they volunteered to serve in the nursery one Sunday. Apparently, they were welcomed to attend, donate, sing and take Holy Communion, they just weren't allowed to serve according to the traditions of the all-male board of elders. Sadly, they left ODF.

Jesus stated, "This people honor me with their lips, but their heart is far away from me. This so-called reverence of men is an empty thing, for they teach as doctrine human rules and regulations.' While you hold fast the tradition of men you abandon the command of God."

Jesus is not just being provocative or rebellious, he is providing an off-ramp for the disillusioned, weary, sin managers of that time and ours. He is reminding the rulers and elders that he was orthodox before orthodox was kosher. Traditions of humankind are as necessary as Adam's and Eve's coverings. To this day we clothe ourselves to cover our self-consciousness, but our true essence is the naked, authentic, free spirit which is more orthodox than anything we could ever knit together.

Now, I am not saying to run naked – there are social norms! I'm proposing Jesus means that, whatever your intentions, you may have made your outward fashions more of an identity than a matter of taste. In the same way there are fashion police, elders have become doctrine police. Like fashion police, they critique that which has no bearing on the soul. It protects the identity of the institution.

So, though I was saved in the '70s, must I choose to dress in the chokers and clenches of that period's evangelical traditions? For God's sake, NO! Perhaps we should return regularly to these words of Jesus lest we draw up new religious obsessions.

When we take the off-ramp Jesus provides, it's as much about what we are running to, as what we are running from. William Barclay says we run to "the heart that's been buried by taboos, regulations and ceremonial rituals."

Good religion becomes bad religion when practices move toward superstitions, rather than a way of being receptive to Presence and the movements of Spirit. No wonder Paul felt free when he was in prison, Peter felt free when he was being whipped like his friend, and Forrest felt free when his shackles were flying off! They live free in the heart.

Whatever the religious compulsions that drive our religious disorders were, Jesus took care of at the Wedding at Cana. They ran out of wine and Jesus turned the water, declared for use by the elders of the traditions for ceremonial cleansing, into wine.

Was Jesus just an impulsive party animal? The first wedding crasher? A provocateur? Or did he want something else to be experienced? The love of the couple and the love of community comes before human traditions.

There is no human consecration, it is only Spirit that consecrates. To consecrate through blessing and cleansing can be to welcome, with awareness, divine Presence. Christ was present at the Wedding at Cana, Christ is present in our meal sharing, Christ is present in our heart's desire to welcome God. There was now no need for ceremonial washing water.

Run Forrest run! Drink the new wine.

Amen

Opening Songs

Be Still

(The London Fox Taizé Choir)

Be still, know that I am God

Hearken to My Voice

(The London Fox Taizé Choir)

Hearken to my voice, O Lord when I call. Have mercy on me and answer me.
You speak in my heart, and say, "Seek my face". Your face, Lord will I seek.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

Come, O Lord, and Set Us Free

(John L. Bell, The Wild Goose Collection)

Come, O Lord and set us free. Give/Bring your people peace.

Come, O Lord and set us free. Come Lord Jesus, Come.

1. And take our guilt away. Give us your pardon Lord.
2. Free from our self-obsession. Free from each fond possession.
3. Free to affirm each other...as sister and as brother

Reshape the world you made. Let what your hand created...be always celebrated.

The Meal

The Lord's Prayer

(The Scottish Festival Singers)

Benediction

A Blessing

(Margaret Rizza, Kevin Mayhew Ltd. Complete Chants Vol.1)

May the Lord bless you.

May the Lord protect you and guide you.

May His strength uphold you. His light shine upon you.

His peace surround you. His love enfold you.

May the Lord bless you.