

“More than Lackluster Habit”

A sermon preached
by the Very Rev. Timothy Jones
Pentecost XV / September 2, 2018
James 1:17-27 / Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

An old preacher at a Pentecostal church
preached fiery sermons.

The preaching often inspired a man in the pews to
jump up and shout "Use me, Lord, use me."

Sunday after Sunday he would shout it.

Finally, after one service the preacher confronted
the man and said,

“If you’re serious, this week I’d like
you to paint the pews.”

The next Sunday, the man again jumped up during
the sermon. But this time, he shouted,

"Use me, Lord, use me,
but only in an advisory capacity."

What matters in our faith is not a lot of talk,
it’s not about showy spirituality.

What matters is a religion that grabs your heart.

What matters is a faith that's more than a custom or polite ritual, but part of a growing relationship with Christ. A transforming faith in Christ. A faith that changes how you pray and live and relate.

“But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers,” we hear from the reading from James.

Make sure your practice of faith is more than something shoved off to the side of your real life.

Make sure it's something you practice.

Jesus gets even more gritty and challenging in his confrontation with the religious leaders of his day.

Confrontation is right.

This was more than an academic debate among scholarly professor types.

No, the discussion got at the heart of how we live.

Along with other confrontations along the way, it would lead to a life and death clash between the two, Literally, by the way, life and death,

considering where Jesus' encounters with the leaders of his day would land him: on the Cross.

In their heated conversation in today's reading, Jesus takes on how the Pharisees practice faith,

how they don't,

and how it can be different for us.

They put ritual and spiritual appearances above ethics, above how they lived.

They could only teach what they knew, inadequate though it was. But Jesus offered another vision for how to live with God, a vision for how people who want something more can find freedom from the trivial and the shallow.

How we can experience the real thing.

The religious leaders who pick a fight with Jesus and his followers thought they could settle for a surface experience of faith.

Their experience of God was shallow and not satisfying, for all their bluster.

For all their fervor, they wouldn't go deeper.

You can be devoted, you know,

And not be profound.

You can have urgency, without depth.

They cared a great deal about ritual purity and

they enjoyed the symbolic applause of others.

But they had lost the real and authentic, making

their rule-keeping a kind of intense hobby,

but they didn't go to the depths, to the core.

They stopped at duty and missed the depth and

delight that a true relationship with God brings.

The immediate prompt for the encounter today

comes as the disciples have come together for a

meal without having washed their hands.

The Pharisees look to Jesus as the leader and ask,

“Why do your disciples not live according to the

tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled

hands?” (v. 5).

Now, to be clear, the Hebrew Scriptures

themselves, what we know as the Old Testament,

never made that requirement.

That bit about hand washing before meals was their extending of a practice originally instituted only for the priest serving at the Temple. They outstripped the law of Moses in their piety. They were missing what was most important.

And Jesus felt irritated on behalf of his disciples. “After all, they have sacrificed a great deal to follow him. Some have given up family, others their careers, still others status.”

And the Pharisees want to pick at the fine points of this little ritual?

Jesus quotes Isaiah, saying, “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines” (vv. 6–7).

Now the Pharisees knew that human beings need a sense of order to feel safe.

Laws and guidelines help keep our communities organized, secure.

Jesus had an immense respect for the laws of his tradition, for the law of Moses.

But what really matters when it comes to living a clean life is what actually comes out of a life. What matters is how someone actually lives. Because what is displayed in outer behavior represents simply what is going on inside.

It's not our dietary restrictions that matter most, but the choices we make in our love of God and love of neighbor.

Which is why Jesus uses the word *heart* two times in our passage. The heart is more than emotion or the seat of affections for the Hebrew people.

It is the center of one's will and urgencies and big choices.

Don't be religious but unchanged, he's saying.

Don't follow the customs and then settle for a dry habit. Don't come to prayer and worship be content with boring experience that leaves your heart untouched.

In the church, I'm sorry to say,

historically teachers and leaders have not always
been very good at keeping such deeply
experienced faith a priority.

We haven't kept such richly lived faith at the
center of our activity.

Which is why I'm excited about RenewalWorks.

You heard mention of it in announcements and
the Tidings. RenewalWorks is a ministry serving
the Episcopal Church that helps people make a
deeper commitment to spiritual growth,

It guides church folks into transformative
practices and experiences.

Lots of churches are participating. We are too,
this month, and for the next several months.

I sense from some of us, an increased, intensified
interest in spiritual growth, in gaining some new
tools for prayer, in getting more deeply familiar
with the great message of the Christian faith,
even how to open our Bibles and prayer books.

The process as it unfolds this coming month will invite you to reflect on ways that the church supports you—or doesn't--in your spiritual quest.

One key part of that will be an inventory. You could call it a survey or questionnaire. Watch for more information about how to share your thoughts. And then a group of 25-30 lay people from Trinity will process and make sense and make suggestions out of the results.

The leaders of RenewalWorks, with whom we are having exciting conversations, explain what can happen: “We offer this work in the confidence that the spiritual health and vitality of our church is inseparable from the spiritual health and vitality of its individual members.”

And, I'd add, inseparable from the commitment of its leaders. I think RenewalWorks is one of the most important things we will do for some time.

Based on accurate tools of surveying we know, as the RenewalWorks folks admit,

“Spiritual practices and embrace of beliefs are low [in our denomination] relative to other denominations. Seventy-three percent of Episcopal respondents identified themselves in the first two stages of spiritual growth; ... at an early, ... less mature stage of spiritual development.” Can’t that be different?

Data also indicate that Episcopal congregations widely embrace a strong serving culture. However, “there is often a lack of clarity about why that service is an expression or outgrowth of Christian identity, [the heart] sometimes making it difficult to distinguish church mission and outreach from the good work of other nonprofit organizations.”

We serve others, but sometimes not as an outflow of a vibrant faith that sustains and motivates us when serving gets demanding.

Further, “the ability to evangelize and to tithe is limited until parishioners have moved further along the spiritual continuum.”

At the same time, we can identify specific actions for us as a congregation to take, and we will, giving attention to “catalysts that will build a new culture of expectancy for spiritual growth here, and help the Episcopal Church grow spiritually.”

I’m struck by what I heard about a professor at a West Coast university, whose religious faith was academic and dry.

He came into contact with some of his students who were on fire with the Spirit, whose love for Jesus was contagious.

He was touched by their spontaneity and their commitment and said to a friend, “I’d like the feel of a faith like that.”

Lots of us would like the feel of that faith.

What might this re-centering of our lives on what is real and an urgent priority look like?

Episcopal bishop and renowned preacher Phillip Brooks generations ago preached,

“The great danger facing all of us is. . . .that some day we may wake up and find that always we have been busy with the husks and trappings of life—and have really missed life itself.”

May we not wake up one day at the end of a life only to see that we have spent our lives on lackluster habits, on making impressions, spent ourselves on priorities that cannot make us whole and close to God.

We don't have to settle for a faith that's not vibrant. We can say, “Use us, Lord. Use us.” And God, working in our midst, will draw us to himself as we embark on these priorities in the next months, May God lead us to new power and joy and truly transforming encounters.