

## 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (L22B) – September 2, 2018

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

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Grace to you and peace from God our creator and our Savior Jesus Christ.

During our recent trip to Scotland and England, Helen and I visited Stirling Castle. This is arguably the most historically important of all the castles in Scotland. Mary Queen of Scots was crowned there. Her son, James VI, later James I of England (the King James of the King James Bible) was baptized in the chapel there and crowned in the church next door. But three hundred years earlier it featured prominently in the First War of Scottish Independence, which was sort of the subject of the movie *Braveheart* twenty-some years ago. Sort of. Mel Gibson took a lot of liberties with the historical record in that film. Anyway, what's interesting about Stirling Castle for my purposes this morning is that it was built to defend the southernmost crossing of the Firth of Forth, which separates southern and central Scotland. The problem for the Scots, though, was that when the English army invaded, which it did repeatedly during that time, they would quickly capture the castle and then use it as a base to attack the Scots further to the north. So this castle, built to defend Scotland, turned out to be instead a weapon used against them by their enemies. The famous Scottish King Robert the Bruce figured this out and after defeating the English in battle, rather than occupy the castle himself, he had its defenses destroyed. And that's why most of the current castle dates only to the 15<sup>th</sup> century and after. (Something similar sometimes happens to people who carry handguns for personal protection. Sometimes they are overpowered by their attackers and what they intended for their defense ends up being used against them.)

Both of these are examples of unintended consequences, and that's that connection I want to make to our gospel reading today. We're finally back to Mark this week after a 5-week detour into John. And we've got these Pharisees and Scribes up from Jerusalem visiting Jesus in Galilee. They're concerned about Jesus' disciples not observing the customs they observe down in Jerusalem. You see, there were these rules for priests for when they were serving in the temple, about washing their hands and washing the sacred vessels. The priests were only a small subset of the population and these rules applied only to them. But the Pharisees wanted to apply these rules to all Israelites as a sign of their being a priestly people. Their intention was a good one. It was to preserve the identity of God's chosen people in this difficult time of foreign occupation, to remind them of their special relationship with God. Just as the role of a priest is to connect God and God's people, so the role of a priestly people is to connect the nations of the world to God, to invite others into God's presence. They were set apart by God to be a blessing to all nations.<sup>1</sup>

But there's more to this encounter that we have to be aware of. Let's remember that Jerusalem was the big city. It was the political and religious capital, while Galilee was a Podunk backwater. Let's also remember that people from Jerusalem and Judea tended to look down on Galileans, the way Northerners have tended to look down on Southerners in this country, or Southerners have looked down on Northerners in England. You know how people make fun of the southern accent here? Well they make fun of the northern accent in England. And I'll just bet that the Judeans made fun of the Galilean accent too, because in Matthew, on the night of Jesus' arrest, Peter is identified as one of Jesus' followers because of his Galilean accent.

So Jesus gets angry at these Pharisees and Scribes because instead of making them a blessing, their tradition had become a sign of their superiority, an excuse to look down on those who didn't practice it. Instead of connecting people with God, the Scribes and Pharisees were

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, Commentary on Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23, [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3758](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3758). See also Genesis 12:3.

throwing up walls, separating themselves from those they were meant to connect with. Their customs made them feel good about themselves at the expense of others.

Now I wish that the Scribes and Pharisees were the last to do this sort of thing, that Jesus' disciples got the point and never tried to take advantage of their connection with Jesus for their personal gain, that they never considered themselves superior to others because they were Jesus' disciples. But we're going to see in upcoming readings that unfortunately that was not the case. And it didn't stop with the disciples. In a couple of weeks I'm going to start teaching a course for our synod on the Lutheran Confessions. (Confession in the sense of "what we believe.") The Lutheran Confessions are a set of documents from the time of the Reformation that set out how the Lutheran Reformers were trying to reform the church. At their heart is the proclamation of God's unconditional love and forgiveness for all people, completely unearned and undeserved, for Jesus' sake. Otherwise known as grace. The conviction was that communicating this amazingly good news was the church's central task. Because when this news is communicated, they said, God the Holy Spirit gets to work creating faith in us, faith that delivers the life and salvation that the good news promises. That's the Lutheran Confessions in a nutshell. (Show & tell: Book of Concord).

Now just as Jesus' message was opposed, so was the message of the Lutheran Reformers, and just as Christians and Jews became divided as a result, so did Roman Catholics and Lutherans, and then other Protestants. And in the process of fighting back and forth, the Lutheran Confessions, originally intended to unite the church, soon became weapons in its division. Kind of like Stirling Castle was turned from a means of defense into a weapon of the enemy. Today there are some who use the term "Confessional Lutherans" as a badge of their superiority, as if to say, "I follow the Confessions and you don't." It's not unlike those who call themselves "Bible-believing Christians." The implication is that others do not believe the Bible.

I was going to talk about liturgy here in a similar way. I've been writing newsletter articles explaining the meaning of all that we do in our worship services, explaining that the liturgy is meant to be something that feeds us with the gospel and draws us closer to God. But most of us know about "worship wars" in the church, and how the liturgy can be weaponized. I won't go into that now, but maybe I'll write about it down the line in the newsletter.

The point is, there is no custom, no tradition, no set of rules or principles that we sinful, self-centered human beings cannot misuse in the service of our own agendas. And that's because at the heart of the matter is a problem with our hearts, a problem that we cannot fix. We are in captivity to sin and cannot free ourselves. (Those words are back in the brief order of Confession and Forgiveness this week.) Our customs and traditions and rules are not the cause of our problem. But our misuse of them is a symptom. And so when God in Jesus Christ intervenes, when he comes among us as one of us to fix what we cannot fix, it's no wonder that the holier-than-thou types – I'm talking about me and you – that we see him as a rule breaker, a threat to our identity and status. And that's because he is. But that's a good thing. Because, in the words of Ezekiel, he has come to swap out our hearts of stone for hearts of flesh and blood, or in the words of Psalm 51, to create in us clean hearts, and to renew in us a right spirit. Heart transplants are no picnic. At least one of us here at Grace knows that all too well. But when that happens – when God addresses our heart problem as only God can – then our lives are changed, and our customs, and traditions, and principles can also be fixed and be reformed into helpful tools in the service of God's gracious mission to save and renew the whole world. May we take that message to heart – so to speak – and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.