

Mark 7:1–13

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

Taught for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B (Revised Common Lectionary) · 21 August 2012

In the texts for this Sunday, the Thirteenth after Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is uprooting us from our self-preoccupations, from our pieties, to bring us to rest in faith in Christ Jesus. Here's the difference. Faith is the Holy Spirit's work. It is done to us, done in us, by the Holy Spirit through the Word, using the voices of our pastors, our teachers, and our neighbors to anchor us firmly in Christ Jesus. As Luther said, faith takes us outside ourselves and brings us to rest in him.

Piety moves in the other direction. If faith is the work of the Holy Spirit, piety is something we do. It's a little like brushing your teeth or cleaning your fingernails, or, as in the text for today, washing your hands. It has to do with disciplines, disciplines that can be considered important and helpful, but disciplines in which we work on ourselves. In faith we forget ourselves. In piety we watch ourselves, and watch ourselves working on ourselves, to make sure we keep up the good habits of life.

So piety involves a set of disciplines that are considered important and helpful and in fact function just that way. Reading Scripture daily, for instance, is an extraordinarily helpful discipline. In the life of faith we become more and more familiar with God's Word. The trouble is that piety always wants to dress itself up, go in drag, and pretend to be faith. Faith is something God does; piety is something we do. And as we become pious, as we accept these disciplines, we get caught up in them and start equating them with faith itself. Then of course we get into trouble. Piety becomes sanctimoniousness, sanctimoniousness becomes self-righteousness, and instead of getting caught up in Christ Jesus we get caught up in ourselves. Caught up in ourselves, we start comparing ourselves with our neighbors, and the inevitable result is either pride, "I'm more pious than you are," or despair, "I will never gain enough discipline to be considered worthwhile."

So piety requires regular spankings. It has to be brought down to earth. It has to be pushed down the stairs. It has to be told, "You are not faith." And that is exactly what Christ Jesus is doing here. He is dealing with the pious, and as he deals with them he gives piety a good kick

in the pants, uprooting it like so many weeds, so that the true flowers of faith can be planted and we can bloom and grow in him.

Both the psalm and the text from Isaiah are attacks on piety, and there's no one better than Isaiah for a job like this. You can guess that old Isaiah gets pretty blistering. Luther once compared Melancthon and himself to Jeremiah and Isaiah. Melancthon, he said, is like Jeremiah: he nicks and cuts and snicks and slices, whereas Isaiah uproots and destroys the whole thing. Melancthon is like a plane, and Isaiah is like a broadaxe, and Luther compared himself to the broadaxe. Of course, we see Isaiah there.

The text from Ephesians is not so friendly today, at least for the preacher. It gives advice on marriage. Here's a good way to get in trouble. Some feminist recently home from the clubhouse is going to be waiting for you at the back of the church after this one, saying, "Where do you come from?" We'll have to be careful and pick our way through it with some sense, because there are various forms of piety, and some of them are not necessarily religious at all. Lots of them in our culture have to do with the relationship between the sexes, and the faith of Ephesians, we should say, doesn't necessarily match the piety of those with strong political commitments here. So we'll have to take a good close look at the epistle. It has been a relief for us these last several weeks, and now it's going to pose a problem as we move toward the end of the book. Nevertheless, it's wonderful. This text has a lot to give us, and it's not quite so doctrinaire as it might appear to those eager to take offense.

Then we'll go and watch Jesus. Man alive, has he got the spurs on! Speaking of planes and broadaxes, he's got the bronco between his knees, and he's going to ride it right down. This is so much fun. He's after the Pharisees, who of course were the pietists of the day, and he's after them not only with saddle but with bridle and whip, and he's going to break them if he can, and us too, in the process. So we've got lots to play with this time. We'll look at the supporting texts as usual, and then go to Mark 7:1-13, this gorgeous story of Jesus taking on the pious. You can hear the toilet flushing in the verses that follow, but unfortunately those words aren't part of this text. Maybe they'll come up next week.

There were all these great Phyllis Diller jokes in the paper this morning, and we laughed all morning reading them. She said she had a peekaboo blouse: people peek, and then they boo. So I'm not going to peek at next week's text; we'll wait and find out whether we get to go on with the rest of this passage from Mark 7, which is a dear favorite. Of course, I never met a text I didn't like, I have to admit. But we'll go to work.

Isaiah 29: Lips Near, Heart Far Away

First, Psalm 14 and Isaiah 29. We'll begin with Isaiah. In verse 13 of the Isaiah text the problem is set out, and then there's another passage where the real problem is exposed. The problem is this: the lips are near, but the heart is far away. This is the risk in piety. It is eager to discipline the lips, eager to find a visible expression of itself, and so it focuses on what is at hand, on what can be done. So the lips are near, but the heart is not in it. That's characteristic of piety. It is always concerned with appearances, and being concerned with appearances, it isn't so fussy about what's behind them.

So Isaiah gets out the axe and starts swinging. "Because these people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote": something done as an exercise, a discipline, spiritual straddle hops or whatever, in which piety mimics faith and then claims to be faith, even while its heart has already gone home and is watching Sunday afternoon football, or more likely watching the figure of the person in the next pew. The lips are there, but the heart is far away. That's the first indictment: for all the concern expressed about the exterior, there is no necessary connection between exterior and interior. Heart and hands are disjointed.

But the real problem shows up at the end of the text. "You turn things upside down!" he says in verse 16. "Shall the potter be regarded as the clay?" Here's the real problem when piety starts exceeding its boundaries and pretending to be faith: piety believes it is working on God. When you listen to the pious, you hear things like this: you allow God, you let God, you invite God, you permit God. In fact, it's the pot allowing the potter to work on it. It's just reversed. You have things upside down. "Shall the potter be regarded as the clay," for Pete's sake? "Shall the thing made say of its maker, 'He did not make me'; or the thing formed say of the one who formed it, 'He has no understanding'?" This is just crazy.

So this is piety: we become active and take the initiative, and God has to apply to us to be allowed or permitted or let to do whatever God pleases. In Scripture it's just the other way around. God is the one who creates out of nothing, raises the dead, and makes all things new. He doesn't apply to anyone. He does, accomplishes, finishes, completes. He does all things. He is active in every human action; not a thing happens without his awareness. The trouble with piety when it gets out of place is that it turns the verbs around. We become active, God becomes passive, and we're firmly in the driver's seat.

So God is uprooting this false piety. He is exposing it as a fraud, and he does so because, as verse 19 points out, he is on his way to faith. Faith exposes piety for what it really is: a pretense, a manageable pretense, helpful in its place but fraudulent in relation to God.

Psalm 14: Practical Atheism

Psalm 14 carries just one attack after another. When I was working on the text this morning, I thought of dear old Kent Knutson, who used to be president of the American Lutheran Church and was one of my teachers years ago, one of the great men I ever knew. He used to talk about the practical atheism of the church. We act as though God is in charge, but in fact we proceed on the basis of our own plans and projects, and so God becomes a kind of cosmic endorsement for what we're going about anyway. You can see this in the new political piety of the ELCA. In the great words of Hans Joachim Iwand, the living God is treated as a motor to drive the social causes of the recently prevalent upper middle class. The gospel counts for nothing except as a motivating device to encourage people.

"Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.'" The fool says in his heart, "Well, God is in charge, but I'll take care of this." We saw this piety erupt, for instance, in the ecumenical movement some years ago. The oneness of the church is a given according to the creed, but according to the church officials it was an accomplishment the bureaucrats were called to bring about. So in John 17, when Jesus prays to the Father for the oneness of the church, he is actually applying to Chicago and the other church headquarters to make an effort to get us all activated to bring this oneness about. And it turned out to be what all these efforts turn out to be. The Grand Inquisitor was an ecumenist; you can never forget it. The Grand Inquisitor is Dostoevsky's great ecumenical officer, there to make oneness happen. That's just the way it works: ecumenism becomes another name for tyranny. Well, when God does it, God exposes it.

"Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is no one who does good. The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one." Every attempt to solve this problem ourselves just proves that like begets like. When the old Adam makes the new Adam, the new one looks just like the old one.

So Psalm 14 puts an exclamation point after Isaiah, emphasizing the fruitlessness of piety. Piety has its place, no question about it. There are some helpful habits. Reading Scripture is helpful, attending church is helpful, singing hymns is helpful, and fasting and other practices serve a good purpose. Some forms of piety are reasonable. But when piety starts climbing up the lattice into heaven, the good Lord has to smash it and say, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Bang! There you go. Psalm 14 is just a slight variation on that.

Ephesians 5: Start at the End

With Ephesians 5:22–33, I think the best thing to do is to start at the end of the passage. If you begin at the beginning, it sounds pretty tough and doctrinaire, especially to contemporaries who are used to beginning with equality and will not tolerate any talk of subjection. But if we begin at the end, we can see that it is not as doctrinaire as it appears. Verse 32: “This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.”

All of a sudden this comes in bounds, in this way. The author of Ephesians is drawing a very interesting parallel between marital love and Christ’s relationship with the church. Christ’s becoming incarnate is the real mystery of it all. But the relationship of husband and wife is also mysterious, in several ways: mysterious in that you can never quite understand how the love that creates it develops and grows; mysterious in that it is sustained in a seemingly miraculous way; and mysterious in that the two are joined in the deepest sort of way. “This is a great mystery.” Just as the mystery of Christ’s love for the church is profound, the mystery of marital love is equally so.

I was talking the other day with an old friend who has been married sixty-five years. She said, “The first fifty-five years were terrible. The last ten have been fabulous.” Now, it’s easy to wonder how she stuck it out through those fifty-five, but in fact this is a confession of faith, a joyous confession. Of course there were stresses and strains; she said it took him that long to grow up. If he had told it, you could guess he’d have made an equal contribution. This is a mystery: that we are so bound together in love. And the author of Ephesians wants to use it to speak of Christ’s great love for the church.

When you see an old couple coming up to communion, when you see an old couple kneeling together, when you see the quiet attentiveness, the routines of love, the soft touching and brushing, the soft togetherness, you are seeing Christ’s relationship with his church. You are

seeing a mystery. And when you see that mystery, you are seeing something that can't be resolved or explained or reduced to ten steps, or bottled up by Pat Keifert and his pals and sold as magic. This is beyond us. And because it's beyond us, the words to husband and wife are, all of a sudden, more qualified at the end of the passage than they appear to be at the beginning. I think they're consistent, but they're easier to hear at the end than at the beginning, because they're more proximate.

"This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. Each of you, however," and here he goes back to the parallel, "should love his wife as himself." As you know, the parallel literature in the ancient Roman world reads very differently. This is an extraordinary, unusual passage. "Each of you should love his wife as himself": that is, she is the husband's flesh. "And a wife should respect her husband." Now both are placed on the ground; both have their feet in the earth.

This, of course, is the wife's temptation. She knows her husband better than anyone. So a wife's classic temptation is contempt: to know his motives before he does, and to say things like "You always" or "You never," and so to refuse the possibility of novelty or surprise or delight, and to enclose the husband in disrespect, so that the whole relationship starts to crumble. You've seen that. You've heard that: "Oh, he's always like that; that's just the way he is." Or, "She can't shut up for love or money." Disrespect, and of course the relationship starts to founder.

So here's the minimum. Husband and wife are united as Christ and the church are united. So husbands should love their wives, cherish them, honor them; and wives should respect their husbands, and not submit them to the bath of contempt that becomes altogether too common when you're living literally in one another's laps. It's tough. But when you see how Christ loves the church, then you have a model for what happens in the household.

And if you start there, then you can go back to the rest of the passage. You also have to remember what makes these passages unusual. Usually a passage like this would be addressed to the husband and would involve the husband's rights. But in this case both husband and wife are addressed, and both are called into a common search for love, a common experience of love and hope. "Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands." It sounds a little tougher up here than it does down below, but still you get the idea

that the wife is looking for what is best for her husband. And now it comes: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”

Of course, one of the great privileges of being a parish pastor is that you actually get to see people like this, marriages like this, people who love each other in such a deep and profound way. When you see it, it’s one of the greatest things you ever see. You’re getting a glimpse of Christ’s love for the church. So rather than surrendering this passage to the piety of the currently pious, I think it’s better to reach deep into it and see what is actually being contended for, what blessing is actually being given, and what is being hoped for and called for here. In that light, rather than becoming something burdensome, an enclosure, a recipe for bringing wives to submission or husbands to contempt, this passage becomes a way through to the future.

This is paraenetic material. That is to say, the assumption behind this passage is that something is working in you besides your own will. That something is the Holy Spirit, who has taken hold of you through his Word and is holding you fast in the promise, to loosen your grip on yourself, so that you can turn to your wife or your husband in the joy of the gospel and say, “Wow. Are you ready to go home now? I’m ready.”

Mark 7: The Pharisees and the Washing of Hands

But we’re not going to leave without having some fun with this passage from Mark 7. I remember reading Ernst Käsemann’s treatment of this passage when I was a young pastor. It’s just fabulous. He just goes to town on it, and I’ve never quite recovered from it. He hated the pietists; he grew up under them. The pietists could hear the broadaxe being sharpened.

So we’ll look at this passage and have some fun. It’s important once again to know who the Pharisees are. They are the pietists. They were convinced that the Roman captivity of Israel was God’s punishment for disobedience, and they believed the disobedience was collective. It was not simply a case of individuals not following the law; it was a matter of national disobedience. So their goal was to renew the nation, to bring it into conformity with the law, in effect by becoming a moral rearmament agency. You remember that group a few years ago, Moral Re-Armament: we’re going to tone up the behavior of the world. Here we go: the Pharisees were going to tone up the obedience of Israel, bring the people to a newer, greater, more consistent obedience, so that nationally, corporately, God would see that they had finally

learned their lesson, and having seen it, God would back off and send the Romans home, and Israel would be Israel once again.

So they are a lay movement, much like the old Haugeans we remember among the Norwegians. They were lay people, not ordained. They traveled about together in groups, and like so many moral vigilantes, concerned for the righteousness of the nation, they just ooze eagerness for legal obedience. So it's not surprising, given the nature of this group, that they should find Jesus and his disciples out in the field making what we back in North Dakota used to call wheat gum: harvesting the wheat in their hands, rubbing out the heads, popping them in their mouths and chewing, getting the nutritional value of the wheat without baking. That's a favorite. We used to chew wheat gum routinely. It was delightful.

The problem for the Pharisees is that this is an attack on national righteousness. Somebody isn't keeping the Third Commandment. How are they disobeying it? They're harvesting. They're out there working the wheat on the Sabbath day. And of course they're accumulating demerits collectively for Israel, which will move God to continue the punishment he has imposed through the Romans.

This is what happens with piety: it becomes preoccupied with externals and forgets the internals. Discovering a healing on the Sabbath, it is not going to rejoice in the release obtained for the sick or the dying. It's going to say, "What day is it? What time is it? Did he do it at the right time, on the right day?" So the external triumphs over the internal, and in triumphing over it becomes an indictment.

And so here we have the issue of the washing of hands. This is very interesting. Those of us who have lived and worked in Africa know these customs of hand washing and foot washing. When you come to somebody's house for a meal, there's no faucet or sink waiting for you. Instead there's a little bowl with a piece of soap beside it, and the bowl is passed from person to person, and you wash your hands at the table. You wash your hands at the table for hygienic reasons, because of course we all know the kind of contaminants the hands can pick up from doorknobs, toilet handles, and other significant protrusions we encounter through the day. So you wash your hands. That's a legitimate exercise. It's not only good manners; it's good health. It's important.

But when piety gets hold of hand washing, it isn't content to remain a discipline. It wants to elevate the discipline into something of cosmic value. It's not just that you go to the table with

clean hands, and going to the table with clean hands you get to eat. It's more than that. Piety wants to elevate hand washing into something of eternal value. And when it does, one of the first things it does is preclude any exceptions. It's not just that you should wash your hands to keep from being contaminated, or to protect your neighbor from your contaminations. You wash your hands as an ultimate, saving act. Cleanliness is next to godliness, and so on and so forth. And when you've got it elevated to that height, then when somebody doesn't follow the rituals of hand washing, for whatever reason, they have committed an offense against the nation.

So these vigilantes have made hand washing into something ultimate, and they ask, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" A legitimate question. But because hand washing has been elevated into a saving act, Jesus turns on them with the passage from Isaiah. He's got the broadaxe in his hands, and he's going to swing it. "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, '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.' You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

This is the first problem with piety. In its preoccupation with the external act, it leaves the internal untouched. Legal piety has this characteristic: the question is always, What can I get away with? How much? What's the minimum? What do I need to do? And here's really the argument: the Pharisees insist that the minimum is this saving understanding of hand washing, and therefore no exceptions are allowed. "In vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines." They have elevated hand washing far beyond its original context, and having elevated it, they have turned it into a legal requirement with no exceptions allowed.

Corban

There's another problem with piety, as Jesus deals with them. "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition!" What is at stake in keeping your tradition? Establishing the righteousness of Israel as a collective; establishing our own righteousness. And this is invariably what happens with piety: it starts making exceptions, bending the rules to accommodate its own striving. "For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.' But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, 'Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban'

(that is, an offering to God), then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.”

Here’s the problem. The care of parents, the original target of the Fourth Commandment, is of course one of the most challenging things in life. We don’t see as much of it as previous generations did, because Social Security has made it possible for parents to be independent of their children and not depend on them financially. But in the two-thirds world, outside North America and Europe, Social Security is your children, and your children are obligated to provide for you as their parent until death parts you. Of course this becomes burdensome. The main instance of physical abuse in households is not men abusing their wives but adult children abusing elderly parents who are going into their dotage and becoming more and more problematic: forgetful, losing their potty training, having more and more trouble coping with the simple demands of life. They literally lean all over their children, and for many families the financial and emotional demands become simply unbearable.

So here is what the pious have done. They have found a way of dedicating a gift to God so that the parent can make no claim on it. A nice, nifty solution to the problem. This is how piety works. It doesn’t ask how much we can do, but what we can get by with. And when you can get by with something like this, then by dedicating your gift to God you can say, “I am pious, devout. I’m serving the Lord, and my parents will have to look out for themselves.” Never mind your parents. Piety is always concerned with itself, and therefore willing to make exceptions. Jesus has it pinned.

And he’s still not done. We’ll have to see whether the framers of the lectionary will dare to take us into the bathroom, where Jesus goes in the remaining verses. I’m suspicious that they stop short for a reason. The sewer is just around the corner, and we’ll probably have to stop in there too before we’re done with this.

At any rate, you can see what Jesus has done. He has gone after the false piety that makes claims for itself, so that, taking piety away, he can bring us to rest in himself. That is faith. And when faith comes to rest in him, we can be confident that he will provide the righteousness we need, freeing us from our dreadful self-preoccupation and bringing us to rest in himself.

God's peace to you. Julie assures us that we're going to find the sewer next week. I love this passage a little too much. Of course, when you grow up in North Dakota, you always look for the potty in every text; I'm afraid it's a bad habit. But we'll have some fun with it. God's peace to you, and all the best to you and your witness. I'll be praying for you, and we'll look for you next week.

SOURCE

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Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ga8cKENzqD0>

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