



## CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of our one living, loving, and life-giving God. Please be seated.

In this week's now familiar gospel reading, Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem confront Jesus about the failure of some of His disciples to live according to the tradition of the elders, because they eat without first washing their hands. Although expressed simply as a question, why do your disciples not, it was plainly a loaded one meant to discredit Jesus. But Jesus refuses even to answer the question and instead accuses the Pharisees of being like those Isaiah warned about, who honor God with their lips, but whose hearts are far from God.

The practices followed by the Pharisees were not commandments as such. There is no specific scriptural basis spelling out their routines in the laws coming down from Moses in Leviticus or Deuteronomy or elsewhere in the Torah. Rather, they developed as part of an oral tradition that came to be established later. Probably as a result of the Babylonian exile, when the Jews, being strangers in a strange land, needed to up the ante on rituals that would mark them as different than the surrounding people, in order to preserve their separate identity as a nation. It is perhaps on that basis that Jesus accuses them of merely holding to human tradition.

But it was established tradition. Mark tells us the washing hands before eating is something all the Jews do as part of preserving the tradition of the elders. And there is nothing inherently wrong with it. Even if it was not required by Mosaic law, it certainly wasn't prohibited by it and could even be seen as supporting the general thrust of the law.

And yet in the text quoted from Isaiah, Jesus accuses the Pharisees of abandoning the commandment of God. What commandment could that be other than the great commandment to love God and love neighbor? The charge it would seem, and this has to be based on more than this one episode, was that they elevated adherence to the letter of the law over its spirit. Being more concerned about whether people were obeying the rules in all their minutia, rather than caring about the fundamental call to love those people.

Having dismissed the Pharisees and scribes as hypocrites, Jesus then calls back the crowd to offer them a different approach, a different way to see things. He tells them that there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile, explaining that it is from within, from the

human heart that evil intentions come. So we don't have to obsess over what we eat and how we eat it the way the Pharisees may have done. In verse 19, one that is curiously skipped over in our lectionary, Mark says that it goes even further, explaining that by saying that nothing that comes from outside of us can defile us. Jesus "declared all foods clean." In other words, this is how we get to serve those bacon-wrapped scallops that I love to eat at the receptions in the atrium.

But there is obviously more to it than that. Jesus goes on to give a pretty long list of evil things that come from within, covering most of the 10 Commandments and maybe then some. And here's the thing, wouldn't most of us have preferred to be able to blame all the bad stuff on things outside of ourselves? Yes. While there may be some comfort in knowing that things out there aren't going to defile us, the alternative does not sound like such good news after all. All the defiling stuff is already right here in us, in me. What am I supposed to do with that realization that any evil desires I might have, and I have them, come from within me, right from my own heart? I don't recall choosing to put them there, nor do I know how to remove them. It's who I am. Simply put, the awareness that evil intentions reside in us, not someplace else can be a cause of shame.

On that, let me say a few words about the distinction between guilt and shame. Guilt is about actions we have done that are perceived as wrong, while shame is about who we are. They can be related. For example, our guilt about the things that we have done can make us feel ashamed to be the kind of person who does them, but they are different. Shame assaults our identity in a way that guilt does not. With guilt, we may fear punishment. With shame, we fear being exposed to ourselves and others for who we really are and coming up short.

According to Episcopal Priest, Jill McNish, shame is an inevitable, ontological, she says, part of the human condition, dating back to the time when Adam and Eve first knew that they were naked. This, she says, should not be seen as a bad thing. In her book, "Transforming Shame," McNish considers a theology of shame in light of insights from a century and a half of depth psychology, from Freud and Jung to experts practicing today, concluding that while shame certainly can be debilitating and destructive, it can also be transformative.

She goes so far as to say that maybe God implanted shame in us as a way of drawing us closer. Even suggesting that an experience of shame of some kind, whether over our failures, our shortcomings, our powerlessness over mortal needs and longings and desires may be a necessary precondition to any genuine religious experience. She explains, shame is an important way that God reaches out and touches us. We are frustrated, even overcome at times, by our physical finite nature and by our failings and inadequacies. It is just there in that godless vortex that God is most often revealed to us, and that we feel most known and seen by God.

Shame, she says, can move from being destructive to becoming transformative when we stop dwelling on our inadequacy and instead give ourselves over to a sense of awe at the enormity of the God in whom we live and move and have our being and accepts us as we are. Unfortunately, instead of acknowledging our shame before God as the opportunity it is to experience God's grace, we often put up defenses to our shame. Defenses that may lessen our pain but via the cost of making us in McNish's words, less permeable to God.

Just a little aside here, I had no part in selecting the cover art for today's bulletin. I have no idea how or why it was chosen, and the person who selected it had no idea what I would be saying in this sermon. But interestingly, there does seem to be a connection. The painting is not of a religious theme at all, but depicts Narcissus of Greek mythology, whose downfall was falling in love with an image of himself, a reflection in a pool. And that's what defenses against shame can be like. Falling in love with an image we have created of ourselves instead of acknowledging who we really are.

Pretending that we can achieve righteousness by religious observance can be one such defense, where piousness becomes the persona we fall in love with and hope others will too. The side effect, as we saw in the case of the Pharisees with their adherence to ritual purity, is exclusion, a holier than thou hierarchy that leaves outcasts in its wake. Jesus would not let the Pharisees shame Him. His ministry focused on people who, under the mores of His time, were under a cloud of shame, but He did not shame anyone except perhaps those who were trying to shame others.

McNish says it would be a grave mistake though to think that the gospel lesson is merely that we should follow Jesus's example to be kind and inclusive to outsiders. That misses an important point. Yes, the gospel is about the outcast, the unlovable, the impure, the shamed. But it is about those parts that live in all of us, not just other people. The efforts we make to face our own shame, McNish says, is how we work out our salvation. And this in turn, empowers our acceptance of others. If we honestly and courageously confront our own shame, she says, we would not even be tempted to treat others as outcasts and stigmatize them.

The goal of the church then should not be the elimination of shame. That, McNish says, would be like Jesus refusing to be crucified. Instead, Jesus embraced the ultimate shame experience, dying half naked on a cross for all to see, and He transformed it into something redemptive. The institutional church has not always gotten it right. It's capitalized on people's shame to browbeat them, instead of to reach out to them with the consolatory news of shame transformed in Christ. The mistake the Christian Church has made for the better part of 2000 years, McNish says, is telling people in sum and substance that they are miserable sinners and should be ashamed of themselves. What the message should be is that God

already knows of our shame and offers us instead His transforming grace and acceptance.

Here again, the distinction between guilt and shame is relevant. We have not been sinless and we are guilty of doing things that were harmful to ourselves and others. For the legitimate guilt that goes with that, the church offers penitence, pardon, and the opportunity to make reparation. But for the shame we feel, what's offered is acceptance, not acceptance without judgment, but in spite of it. It is, as one author put it, the chance for being accepted without regard to whether we are acceptable. God's grace works to remove the experience of rejection that lies at the heart of shame, and as members of the body of Christ, we can be part of experiencing and sharing that acceptance.

Communities like ours here at Christ Church are places where God's healing grace can be experienced in embodied form, in the accepting attitudes of those around us. Shame is about the experience of being fully seen by God for who we really are in all our shortcomings and imperfections. And of course, God already sees that every day. And we even say that we know it, as we say at the collect for purity at the outset of our services each week: To God, all hearts are open, all desires known and from you, no secrets are hid. Even so, we often behave as though that were not so, thinking that God only sees the parts that we invite Him to see. To know God's grace, we need to acknowledge in our hearts what we already say we know. We are exposed to God in all our parts, including the shamed and shameful ones, and God loves and accepts us still.

With that acknowledgement can come wholeness. The opportunity to acknowledge our full selves and shame to God is always there. But now as we come forward to receive Christ's body and blood sacrificed for us would be an especially appropriate time. All of us we know are welcome to the banquet. That includes, we must remember, the fullness of every bit of who we are.

Amen.