

The Heart in Worship

Mark 7:1-8

preached March 21, 2010 by Dr. Dwight Kilbourne

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" 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; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

Introduction. One evening while Patty and I were eating at a restaurant, I went to the restroom. While I was washing my hands, I noticed one of the employees come from one of the bathroom stalls and go out of the door of the restroom without washing his hands. His action made me a bit queasy. When I returned to my table, I asked our server to send the manager by our table. I told the manager what I had witnessed and he said he would take care of it immediately. To be honest with you, I was not sure I wanted to finish my meal at that restaurant that evening. Unwashed hands seemed like a sizeable offense to me.

Mark tells us of an encounter Jesus had where some of the religious leaders were upset because they noticed that Jesus' disciples did not wash their hands before they ate. They were upset because the disciples were not observing the Jewish traditions of purification before a meal. Their concern was somewhat different from what my concern had been. I was concerned about the sanitary. They were concerned about sanctity. The concern by the religious leaders was a matter of ritual cleanness.

This encounter and the criticisms that came from this religious group opened the door for Jesus to address the matter of honoring and worshiping God. What he said regarding this matter penetrates to the heart of worship which relates to our hearts being engaged in worship.

Pointless worship. Do you know that sometimes our worship can be vain or pointless? It can be an exercise in futility and meaninglessness. That is a serious thing for me to say because I am an advocate for worship and long for people to be involved in corporate worship on a weekly basis. I believe there is no corporate activity we do as Christ followers that has higher value than our worship. Yet, our worship can be pointless.

Jesus highlighted this problem when he quoted from Isaiah – "*in vain they worship me.*" He knew that worship at times could be pointless. Let's examine what Jesus identified as "pointless" worship.

Jesus said, "People honor me with their lips but their hearts are far from me." If we were to put that into the street language of our time it would be – *Pointless worship is all lip and no heart.*

During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made an enlightening comment related to this: "*When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words*" (Matthew 6:7). Probably most of us can see this image of words being stacked on top of each other – "Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah."

In general, we tend to use lots of words in our prayers and worship. It is not that words are bad or should not be used. Words are important. Yet when we become so concerned about the number or the particular words we use, we begin to lose authenticity. Our words must flow from the treasure of our heart for our worship to be authentic.

Jesus knew that the religious elite were often more concerned about the externals than the internals. They wanted to assure that everything was done as it should be

done. They wanted the disciple's hands to be "ritually" clean.

When it comes to our worship, there are many external matters that are practical in nature such as the sound system being operated properly and ushers being stationed in particular locations. (Recently we received an offering envelope with \$100 bill and on it was a note – "Fix the sound system." I like that way of people registering a complaint and suggestion. It is important for it to be right.) Also there are aesthetic matters such as liturgical colors and lines of vision to the cross and window. If we took time to think, we probably could name dozens of these externals. Each has a level of importance and can enhance or hinder worship. Any time any of these become focal points in our worship, our worship moves toward vanity.

Many of the externals about which Jesus spoke related to the traditions of the religious folks. These were practices that had been carried out by generations of worshipers over the years. These practices passed on to help people know who they were and how to relate to God.

As a local church and as United Methodists, we have many traditions – communion the first Sunday of the month, Christmas Eve services, robed choir and clergy, a processional, dimming lights during prayer, pastors kneeling at the chancel, etc. There are many that are common for us and help us to know who we are and to express our worship. Traditions, in and of themselves, are not bad. We find the NT passes on traditions to the church. Paul wrote that he passed on what he had received: "On the night when Jesus was betrayed, he took bread . . ." (1 Corinthians 11:23). I believe none would say that is a bad or misdirected activity.

But when traditions become primary or we lose all sense of their meaning or they prevent us from experiencing God in new ways, they can make our worship become meaningless.

Three generations of females practiced the same tradition for preparing their Easter meal. Each year, they would prepare a ham. Before seasoning the meat, the cook

would take a cleaver, chop about three inches from the leg of the meat, season it and then carefully place both sections in the pan and bake it. After having done this for a few years, the third generation granddaughter wondered why she chopped off a portion of the meat. So she asked her grandmother. Her grandmother responded, "I had to shorten the leg because my pan was too short."

Putting our heart in worship. While an over-emphasis on words, externals and traditions can nullify our worship, the greater problem that Jesus addressed was a matter of the heart. The religious elite were not putting their heart into worshipping and honoring God. Their hearts were distant and unengaged in worship.

Have you ever been around someone who was doing a particular task but his "heart was not in it?" Perhaps it was an employee who was assigned a task, an athlete who was playing a game or a performer in a play. They went through the motions without emotion. It was for them a task in which they placed no emotional investment. There was no expression of enthusiasm or joy. They may have completed the task in a satisfactory manner but lacked heart in doing it.

A few weeks ago, Patty and I went to Knoxville to attend a two-day conference. The morning of the second day, we went to the hotel lobby to eat the complimentary breakfast. When we arrived, we were greeted by a man that we later learned was the general manager for the hotel. He was very friendly and spoke to every guest. He helped people with their needs and explained things about the food. He gave directions to people who were looking for locations in the area and told them what to see. He cleaned people's tables. As I watched that man, I realized that he was pouring his heart into that job. His attitude brightened our day and the day of those gathered in the lobby.

Engaging the heart in worship.

How can we engage our hearts in worship?

In reality, the answer to this question does not lie with the people who design and lead the worship experience. It is not primarily a matter of how worship is conducted, the music that is sung, the prayers that are prayed or how the sermon

is preached. From time to time, these may help to stimulate the heart, but overall they cannot keep the heart engaged. Engaging of the heart relates to each worshiper and God's action in them. Let me offer a few things that can help each of us engage our hearts in worship.

Preparation. Engaging our hearts in worship happens long before we arrive. We must prepare for worship. Few of you could hardly imagine the worship leaders coming to worship without preparation – the choir not rehearsing, David not practicing the organ, Dwight not preparing the sermon. Not only do these need to prepare, every worshiper needs to prepare.

On March 2 our region was somewhat surprised by a snow storm. In the valleys, there was about an inch of snow that rapidly disappeared after it stopped snowing. But on Lookout and Signal Mountains around 7 inches of snow fell and stayed around for some time. It was amazing how much difference a couple of degrees of temperature made. Preparation helps our spiritual temperature to be at a level where the worship can stick, accumulate and then hang around in our lives. Two people can come to worship and one experience nothing while the other is deeply affected and transformed. Often the difference is just a couple of degrees in their spiritual temperature.

So how do we turn the temperature to an appropriate setting?

- Preparation involves how we live our lives. Jesus called the religious elite "hypocrites." Essentially the Greek word translated as "hypocrite" meant an "actor" who acted out a part in a play. To prepare for worship, we must stop pretending in our lives and get real with God. We must live out what we understand and know what God wants us to do. Mark Twain said, "It is not the parts of the Bible that I don't understand that give me problems but the parts I do."
- Each of us needs to spend time with God on a daily basis through prayer and study. This keeps the heart connected to our heavenly Father.
- We must decide not only to attend worship but also to enjoy it. Ninety-five percent of the time or greater, we can choose the frame of mind we have when we enter this place.

- As we come and when we are here, we must center and re-center our thoughts on the Lord. In coming to worship, I often have many distractions and I confess that during worship my mind often drifts. So it requires centering and re-centering my thoughts on the Lord and what we are doing in worship.

The second part of engaging the heart deals with God's action within us through the Holy Spirit. Once Jesus said to a group of people gathered at a festival, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water'" (John 7:37-38). Can you see the image of a spring coming out of us from deep within, from our heart? It is an image of an engaged heart.

Where these words of Jesus are found, John offers a commentary. He says that Jesus was speaking of the Holy Spirit. You see the source of this internal flow comes from God's presence being within. It is a God-thing.

We must understand that we cannot control the Holy Spirit's action in our lives or church. We can resist and ignore the Holy Spirit in and among us thus hindering the Spirit's work. On the other hand we can submit to the Spirit and allow God to live fully in our hearts and the overflow to spring forth in our worship.

Do we dare submit our lives fully to the Lord and allow the Spirit to flow in and through us?

Is it possible to have our hearts fully engaged each time we gather for worship? I believe it is. For this to be our preparation for worship is vital and the work of the Spirit is essential.

Responding to the Word. Are we willing to commit (and recommit) to prepare for worship and to submit to the Holy Spirit? If you are willing to do so, I want you to take a step to demonstrate that commitment. I want to give you a chance to join me here at the chancel or the front for a time of committing and submitting. Come and in your own words express your commitment and submit yourself to the Holy Spirit. If there is not enough room to pray at the lower chancel, the upper chancel is open for you as well.