

Pentecost 17B
Camp Long, Seattle
August 30, 2015
James 1:17-27, Mark 7:1-23

INSIDE OUT

In the opening scene of **FIDDLER ON THE ROOF**, we meet **Tevye** the milkman as he makes his rounds through the village of Anatevka. Introducing us to his community, Tevye summarizes their way of life together with one word . . . **TRADITION!**

Every relationship and every role within his family and the community of Anatevka is governed by rules and traditions passed down from generation to generation.

Without tradition, Tevye declares, our lives would be as awkward as a fiddler on a roof.

Through the lens of Tevye's family and village, we watch what happens when circumstances bring fundamental change to the way of life he holds dear.

This morning's texts are all about traditions, boundaries and expectations.

What God expects from us, and what we have a right to expect from each other.

- How do we deal with changes to the traditions that have defined our identity?
- How do we live our faith rather than just talk about it?
- What does the Way Jesus invites to live look like.

These questions are at the heart of today's lessons.

The reading from James is the first in a series we'll be hearing over the next five weeks.

James doesn't have the theological training of Paul. He isn't a gifted writer.

But he's motivated by the conviction that the core of the Christian message is about action.

- First, God's generous action on our behalf in Jesus,
- Then our subsequent acts of love—like ripe fruit—in response to God's gift in Christ.

James doesn't spend a lot of time developing themes in his letter, but his focus is always clear:

Tutoring new Christians on what being a Christian looks like, and how faith gets worked out concretely in every day life. BE DOERS OF THE WORD, he says, AND NOT HEARERS ONLY.

A central challenge of the community to which James penned his letter was:

How do we maintain a faithful and a distinctive Christian identity within the overwhelming dominance of Empire?

In many ways, the Pharisaic movement in Jesus' day struggled with the same questions:

With religious and cultural alternatives pressing in on us from every quarter, how do we maintain our identity and our fidelity to the God's Torah?

The answer, for the Pharisaic movement, lay in part in the purity laws and holiness codes that helped them to define themselves over against their neighbors.¹

Rules for observing the Sabbath, dietary restrictions, public health edicts, and other boundaries helped to define who was part of the community and who was not, and so they helped ensure the integrity of the community.

¹ See Karoline Lewis, *New Proclamation*, 2009. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008. Page 187.

By the time of Jesus, THE TEN CORE COMMANDS God had given his people to live by had expanded into complex layers of statues—a “fence” around the core commands, if you will—designed to show precisely how the Law was to be practiced.²

But for the poor and disenfranchised, this so-called “FENCE” around the law was more like a WALL that prevented them from experiencing the compassionate God who’d invited them close.

It’s into this context that Jesus comes, gathering a community around him that includes the poor, women, the physically sick, the mentally ill, tax collectors, and many others who had no conceivable means of fulfilling what the purity code demanded.

Throughout the gospels, the points where Jesus gets into trouble are the points where he defies the tradition. Again and again Jesus announces that God has come near—is here right now—and that the invitation to relationship with God is not restricted, but open.

Turn toward God, he preached, **for God is already reaching toward you!**

The God Jesus shows us in his teaching and in his actions is NOT the DIVINE JUDGE who watches with pencil and clipboard in hand, tracking our every step, ready to WHACK us up side of the head when our tally of mistakes reaches a critical number.

Such a POINT-SYSTEM-GOD is not the God we see reflected in the one who “emptied himself, becoming obedient to the point of death on a cross.”³ And it’s not the God we or the world needs.

The bedrock of Jesus’ proclamation is reflected in Jesus’ injunction:⁴

“Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’
For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

For at his cross, all our systems, all our ladders, all our schemes for accumulating points, and all our methods of earning our way into God’s good graces, are shown what they truly are: deceit and death.

At his cross we finally come to the realization that if the LIFE God places before us is to become fully ours, we can’t get there by managing it or earning it or achieving it on our own; we can only receive it as the generous gift it is, bestowed from the Author of Life himself.

But here’s the paradox, stated so clearly by James: it is our actions, it’s how we carry ourselves in the world, that point to the presence of this gift within us.

Our Brother Martin Luther said it this way:

It is as impossible to separate works from faith as it is to separate heat and light from fire.⁵

And Brother James put it this way:

True religion is this: caring for orphans and widows, for in doing this we remember to whom we belong.⁶

² Donald Juel, *Mark*, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2000), p.102.

³ Philippians 2.

⁴ Matthew 9:13, based on Hosea 6:6

⁵ Martin Luther, “Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul’s to the Romans,” in *Luther’s Works* 35, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960), 371.

⁶ James 1:26-27

In the socially and culturally mixed context that is 21st century Seattle, this question of how we define ourselves as a community in Christ is still relevant.

The specifics by which we live our contemporary lives have changed incredibly.

And, in the last decade especially, social media has accelerated a sea change in the way we relate to each other and communicate. And we've become increasingly more aware of the importance of our relationship with other species and the web of creation that binds us all together.

But the truth is, the standard by which we gauge fidelity to Christ's teaching hasn't really changed at all.

How do you tell if a Christian community—if our congregation—is on the right track? You look at how the most vulnerable in the community are engaged, treated, cared for.

Some scholars think that it was largely Jesus' eating habits and table manners that brought about his downfall.

It's not surprising, then, that among his followers, the abiding presence of the crucified and risen Jesus came to be celebrated in the Table ritual of a new kind of meal.

A meal in which people of both sexes, any race, all ages, and all social classes sat together and ate.⁷

This is the meal we celebrate today.

A meal to which all are welcomed; a meal in which Christ keeps offering himself, wholly and without reservation, so we can share in his abundant life and become his body in the world.

As we gather at this Table, whether here at Camp Long, back at Peace, or anywhere else, Christ meets us just as we are—but he doesn't leave us that way!

In and with the bread and wine he offers forgiveness and healing, and an invitation to be his body in the world.

And as we take in—as we literally consume these gifts—they become part of us. And we, in turn, share this abundant life with sisters, brothers, neighbors, strangers, friends.

Amen?

⁷ Gail Ramshaw, *New Proclamation*, 2003, p. 164