

“CAN’T SEE THE FOREST FOR THE TREES”

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James 1:17-27

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

A couple of weeks ago, on a road trip up to the land of my birth, the Finger Lakes region of New York, a discussion started in the car about iced tea. Why iced tea? Well, it actually was about the best way to drink iced tea. Most of the people in the car like it sweetened, but not me. You see, in New York, it’s unsweetened. That’s how I learned to drink it, and that’s how I love it. Totally and completely unsweetened – just tea, water and ice – period.

Once I was at someone’s house for lunch and she offered me iced tea, and told me I’d like it because it was unsweetened, but unbeknownst to me, she had put mint leaves in it. I took one drink of that and well, let’s just say, it wasn’t pretty. I like my iced tea straight – that’s the way God and New York intended it to be.

Well, that conversation on the road trip came to my mind when I read a humorous story this week about a woman reflecting on the early years of her marriage. Listen to her story. She writes, “When I got married 27 years ago, I thought I knew what to expect. I’d read all the books, talked to friends I knew there would be an adjustment period when we’d decide who would do household tasks (taking out the garbage and washing the dishes), learn each other’s idiosyncrasies (not that I have any) (she writes), deal with each other’s weaknesses (again, not mine), and enjoy one another’s gifts.

I did not expect disagreements over cornbread!

(She continues) I grew up in the mountain south, where all cornbread is made from white cornmeal, a little flour, and the tiniest bit of sugar (if any at all). Add shortening and some leavening agents, throw that baby in the oven, and you have corn deliciousness.

The first time I made it for my husband, it was perfect. And he nearly gagged.

From Baltimore, he was used to cornbread made with yellow meal, lots of flour, and huge amounts of sugar. In my family, we derisively called that type of bread ‘corncake.’ He had no problem with that name. He did have a problem with my cornbread.

My problem was this: his cornbread was just plain wrong. Culinarily. Culturally. Morally. Sacrilegious, if you want to know the truth.” (On-line, “Cornbread Wars,” _____)

Now, right about now, you must be wondering what in the world does differences about cornbread have to do with the Gospel lesson? Well, I’ll tell you. That story is about tradition, about doing the things the way they’ll always been done, about following the rules – in that case, cultural rules; and about what’s right and what’s wrong.

And there’s the connection with the Gospel lesson, for in it, we see a full-fledged fight over rules, and doing things the way they’ve always been done. In this lesson from Mark, the scribes and Pharisees are steamed because the disciples aren’t following the rules, aren’t doing things the way they’ve always been done. So they go to Jesus and complain about it. They call out the disciples, accusing them of breaking religious law, and how could they do that if they claim to be followers of the Lord?

It wasn’t the first time they had complained about it. Over and over, Jesus and his disciples were breaking the religious rules. Jesus touched unclean people to heal them, he healed on the Sabbath, and he healed Gentiles. It was too much for these scribes and Pharisees because they put so much stock in knowing and following those religious rules and laws. It was tradition, by golly, and everybody should be doing it!

And in this lesson, Jesus realizes that the scribes and Pharisees are so fixated on rule following and score keeping, and on doing things the way they’d always been done, that they lost sight of the reason behind the rule breaking. All they saw was “the what” – the breaking of rules and tradition – but they never bothered to ask “the why.” Why were Jesus and the disciples doing that? They couldn’t see the forest for the trees.

So Jesus tries to explain it to them. He tries to get them to see the more excellent way (as Paul puts it) – the way of love, care and compassion – and that to live that way comes from the heart, not from the rule book. To live that way sometimes means saying no to the way things have always been done in favor of a new, more loving, life giving way.

He healed on the Sabbath, knowing it broke a law, because there was a very sick person standing in front of him begging to live. He touched those the law called “unclean” because in God’s eyes, Jesus knew that no one, no one is unclean. He spoke with a Samaritan woman, even though the law said he couldn’t, because she needed acceptance and a chance to start over.

None of those people who had encounters with Jesus would have had their lives changed and made whole if he had followed the rules to the letter. For Jesus, it's about love and relationship.

Let me say this. It's not that Jesus doesn't care about the religious law. Certainly it matters, but when it becomes the sole focus of religion, when it becomes a scorecard of who's following the letter of the law, and when it becomes a means of separating people and ranking them – then it's not what God intended it to be, and certainly not the way that leads to abundant life.

But the Scribes and Pharisees were stuck in that. It's the way it had always been done, and they saw it as their job to make sure it stayed that way. When it came to expansive love and God's abundant grace, they seemed to have embraced what some have called “the seven last words of the church” – which are – “We never did it that way before.”

That would be funny were it not true. Even in the church, we, like the Scribes and Pharisees, want to do things the way we've always done them, and sometimes, sometimes, miss the forest for the trees. Sometimes we get stuck in tradition and fail to see ways to connect with people in new ways so that they might come to know Christ and grow in faith.

You never know. Pastor Janet Hunt tells about something that happened really early in her ministry. She went to serve a small church and having just graduated from seminary, was full of wonderful new ideas to try. One of her first Sundays was a communion Sunday, and she'd been told that the congregation always took communion by intinction. Well, in all her new-pastor, new-seminary-graduate zeal, she decided to change it to kneeling. After all, she thought, then people could kneel and be in prayer and it would be so much more holy.

Well, she couldn't help but notice some looks from the congregation when people realized they'd be doing something very different. But God love them, they went along with her, and up they came for communion, kneeling down dutifully to receive the bread and wine.

Then, Janet says, at the very back of the room sat the matriarch of the church. She'd been told about that woman, a dear woman who had been at that church for decades, more than anyone else. She was loving and giving and was the backbone of that congregation. She was clearly getting up in years, and Janet said, she herself almost cringed, when she saw how difficult it was for this dear woman to kneel down at the rail for communion and then struggle to get up after it was over.

And in that moment, it dawned on Janet Hunt, that the congregation didn't do communion by intinction because it was a rule, they did it that way because they

loved that matriarch and wanted her to be comfortable and included. And from them on, they received communion by intinction.

Later on, Janet reflected on that and wrote, “Kneeling to receive the sacrament is not the same as the hand-washing rituals practiced by the Pharisees. And yet, perhaps the point is the same in the end. For I expect Jesus was happier with the people of my first congregation for their kindness than he would have been had they continued to kneel simply because it had always been done that way. One, of course, could argue that they went overboard, that just because one couldn’t kneel doesn’t mean the others couldn’t. Still, I have always thought of that collective ritual action as simply kind. And I’ve never forgotten the lesson learned that season about paying attention and going deeper and raising questions about what matters and what doesn’t.” (On-line, Janet Hunt, *Dancing with the Word*, “What Matters and What Doesn’t”)

Oh friends, in the end, I think that’s what Jesus calls us to do – to pay attention to others, and when deciding how to act and what to do – err on the side of grace, err on the side of those in need. May we never be so tied to tradition, or so afraid to do something new because “we never did it that way before” that we fail to be the hands and feet of Christ to others.

May it be so.

Amen.