

**OPENING:**

A truly astute preacher could take this Gospel reading and place what it has to say about cleanliness and ritual into our current context of global Pandemic.

That preacher would say something about how masks represent a form of piety, a form of sacred behavior designed to keep us safe.

They would say something else about the deeper issue at the core of our culture, and of humanity itself, about the evils that comes from the inside, from the heart.

I realized this week that I did not have that sermon in me.

I am pretty sure that that sermon exists,

but I am tired of seeing the world through the COVID lens.

And maybe we also need some time to put all of that into perspective

**CONTEXT:**

I am going to run in another direction, taking my cue from the Pharisees who do the same thing, changing the subject in our story.

Jesus has just fed the 5000 and has declared himself to be the “Bread of Life.”<sup>1</sup>

The Pharisees say, “hold up, let’s not talk about abundant life or salvation. Let’s talk about hand washing. Let’s talk about rituals. Let’s see who is allowed into the meal and is following the rules.”

Now, to be fair, the Pharisees are not merely petty bureaucrats and traffic cops, these were important issues for them and are important issues for us as well:

who is in?

who is out?

What about the traditions and customs that hold everything together?

So, maybe they were on to something because they, at the very least, force Jesus to lay his cards on the table and make these forceful statements.

And the Pharisees provide me an escape hatch to veer away from talking about COVID.

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<sup>1</sup> Jumping over to John, admittedly, but being faithful to the lectionary sequence.

## **XMAS CARDS:**

So, in that vein, it's August and we have a lesson about cleanliness, I want to talk about Christmas Cards.

Yes, Christmas Cards, that yearly ritual—that some love and some despise—where you take a picture of yourself, create a message saying what you did over the year, you gather your address list, you get your stamps, and seal the envelopes and send them out in early December, just like Jesus told us to do... somewhere.

I LOVE this ritual. I love every part that I just described. I love the symbolic action of reaching out and sending that Christmas cheer to people all over the map. I love receiving them from others, seeing peoples' families.

In our household, we tape all those cards on the back of the door in our Living Room, a shrine in Technicolor to our loved ones.

Michelle and I spend no small amount of time arguing about many parts of this process (I love that part too). We argue about how many should we buy this year, which picture to use, what's the design. If it were up to me, we would order a thousand, we would single-handedly rescue the U.S. Postal Service from debt with how many stamps we would buy.

But we can't, so we make tough decisions about who "deserves" one and who does not. Indeed, it was a crushing realization my first Christmas here that we could not include anyone in the congregation, because if one person got one, everyone would have to and we don't have the budget for that.

Questions of who is in, who is out, who gets what stamp, who gets a personalized message.

These are what captivate my instinct for this ritual observance.

There is a lot of love in this action, there is also a lot of.... something else going on

I don't fast, I don't do Centering Prayer, I don't volunteer at the Soup Kitchen but I do send out around 100 or so Christmas Cards with some serious intention behind them.

And I know that Jesus would say about it:

"Charles Cowherd, you honor me with their lips,  
but your heart is far from me;

in vain do you worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines."

For the Israelites, scholars say their rituals were an effort at maintaining group identification and solidarity.

For me and the Christmas Cards, it's about nostalgia and creating a historical document, mixed in with some neediness.

### **RITUAL:**

I am making a big deal about my "sin" of Christmas Card because we should not pretend like the Pharisees are the only ones who had this problem.

This problem of hypocrisy, of valuing human actions over God-driven ones is all around.

We are all Pharisees, we all wash our hands, and our brass cups, and we look down on all those who do not.

Unfortunately, it's really easy to see it as someone else's problem.

Historically, it's a Jewish problem, or a Roman Catholic problem, they are the ones who get caught up in rituals and symbols but not us.

It's easy to point our fingers at them and say: they just don't get it, all they care about is the rules, going through the motions, but we, \_\_ (Fill in the Blank) don't.

Doug Price and I's favorite book & movie is the classic Western *True Grit*. There is a scene in the John Wayne version, a conversation between the hard-scrabble adolescent protagonist, Maddie Ross and the buffoonish lawman Laboeuf, pronounced "Labeef" that demonstrates this dynamic,

They are talking about religion and what denomination they are:

*LABOUEF (asks): (You are) Presbyterian, huh?*

*(are you) Southern or Cumberland?*

*MADDIE: - Southern.*

*- My folks are Cumberland (Presbyterian).*

*LABOUEF: I was raised in the Episcopal Church.*

*MADDIE (takes a look at him): I figured you for some kind of kneeler!<sup>2</sup>*

"Some kind of kneeler", she says to him, about our denomination. Her words drip with disdain for those who take pride in making a big deal about ritual.

And it can keep going. Modern-day Evangelicals look down at anyone from the Protestant Mainline and say "tsssk, tssk" and the Emergent church movement looks at the Evangelicals and say "too many rules, too much something"—we are where it's at. Somewhere a Social Justice Warrior is saying "Well I don't spend any time worrying about God or ritual, I just spend my time feeding the hungry, and clothing the naked, and caring for the orphan."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "True Grit Script - Dialogue Transcript" [Script-O-Rama](#) (around the 59 minute mark of the film)

<sup>3</sup> Martha Moore-Keish. "Theological Perspective." (Mark 7.1-24). 2014. *Feasting on the Gospel* Louisville: John Knox, 202.

## **GOSPEL:**

Luckily Jesus comes to clear the deck, to flatten our self-righteousness and navel-gazing.

That's the Good News: our outer observances don't matter. That's nice to hear.

The Bad News is the dirt is already on the inside, it's in our hearts. That's tougher to hear.

We can't wash our hands out of that, we can't out liturgy someone else, no matter how exquisite and planned our Christmas Cards are.

Mark's Gospel has this dark view of mankind. In this chapter, the word "Mankind" ("Humankind" *anthropos*) is mentioned 17 times and it's always negative. So the fancy term is low anthropology, a pessimistic perception of who we are.

Mark provides a big, long list of sins, a usual thing at that time, but usually you get a list of virtues alongside, we don't get that in Mark here or elsewhere.<sup>4</sup>

The Pharisees have a much higher view of our nature, they suggest that you can get there, if only you do this, if only you do that.

Instead, with Mark, think "Pig Pen" from the *Peanuts* comics, always with a dust cloud and stench hovering around him.

Or as Maddie Ross, our resident cynic, Calvinist-Presbyterian, and just honest human being, opens *True Grit* with the immortal theological statement:

"You must pay for everything in this life, one way and another. There is nothing free, except the grace of God."<sup>5</sup>

## **CONCLUSION:**

Coming back to the COVID sermon that was never written, all the commentaries and sermon guides tend published a couple decades back and, in them for this lesson, they wax poetic about the SARS virus and the concept of quarantine and being safe and protecting oneself. That was real.... but nothing compared to this. It all sounded very theoretical and abstract. I found myself joining Maddie Ross and Mark the Evangelist in saying: "Wait until this thing gets worse."

But there's the hope, of course.

The famous preacher William Sloane Coffin was once approached by someone who said: "I would love to join your church, but it's full of hypocrites."

And he said: "Well we always have room for one more."

**AMEN**

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<sup>4</sup> Marcus, Joel. 2009. *Mark* (Volume 1). New Haven, CT: Yale, 454.459, 460, 461

<sup>5</sup> Portis, Charles. 1968. *True Grit*. New York: Simon and Schuster. 38.