

Inner Peace

James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

On this Labour Day weekend, I think many of us come here seeking peace as we prepare for – many families – getting organized again, getting back into the routine of school and activities and all of these other things. For others, it might just be the traffic that comes with school going back. We need to find and attain that sense of inner peace.

But how do we attain inner peace in our lives? And when we attain it, how do we maintain this sense of peace, especially in a world that is often quite chaotic? How do we hold onto inner peace as the demands on our time increase? How do we maintain peace when we are criticized and blamed for things that are not working the way they are supposed to? How do we maintain inner peace when we feel that we have failed to live up to either our own expectations, the expectations of others...and even more importantly, our belief about the expectations that God has of each and every one of us.

We are reminded today that God's ways are not always our ways. This is kind of a human-centric view of things, so instead, let's rephrase it: our ways are not always God's ways. When we are focused on being humans in this world, sometimes it is easy to turn away from God and to forget what God has taught us and is expecting of us in those moments. The story in the Gospel of Mark today is one that always calls us to reflect on what we do and why we do it, and whether or not we need to continue to do it, and for what reason.

Last week, for those of you who were here, I shared an experience of a time when I was criticized for the shoes that I wore as a minister at a wedding – my open-toed shoes. I got another story. Well, two more stories to tell you today of experiences I've had. One was a well-intentioned parishioner at another community of faith. This person was very upset this day, because the organist was not wearing the choir gown as organists are supposed to do. My first question to this person was, "Well, why does that matter?" The person was clearly shocked; their eyes bugged out in that moment as I asked this question and then proceeded to inform me that we should all dress to honour God, which is why her children always came to church in a dress or a suit and tie, sometimes with gloves and a hat. For she had been taught and had been raised that in order to come to church, you wear your Sunday best. At that time I was

doing my Master's of Theological Studies, and I remember suggesting that God wouldn't really care what we were wearing, or what someone else was wearing. It was really more how we treated one another, and that we actually come to worship that was important. The person stormed off, left me standing in the wake of such anger. The parishioner was definitely not pleased with my question or my thoughts. But I had truly entered that conversation in hopes that we could have a dialogue to figure out what would it be that God would want. Not what I want; not what I think the church wants; but what God truly wanted in that moment. If we were going to create a community where all people were treated equally, then it really shouldn't matter what one person was wearing or not wearing.

I had another experience of a formal complaint, a letter sent to the board, again at another congregation. They were upset that on Christmas Eve, the communion table used as a prop in a play that the youth were doing about the story of Jesus' birth. That that was an inappropriate use of such a sacred table. Again, I entered a dialogue with that person to figure out what was it that truly upset them when the communion table was still the communion table, but could also be used in a different way. Again, like Jesus I wanted to ask the question why. Why does it matter? What is so important? There could be a very valid reason, and that would be fine if we were truly in a dialogue discussing why it was important or not important.

These examples came to mind as I read the eighth verse in the Gospel of Mark when Jesus said, "You abandon the commandments of God, and you hold onto human traditions." Jesus was speaking to the Pharisees and the Scribes in this moment, because they were upset that traditions – long-held traditions – were not being upheld and if Jesus was truly a person of the Son of God, why wouldn't they adhere to the commands that God had given? But were they truly commands that God had given, or were they practices because back in the day, we knew that if you ate with dirty hands you could become sick? Did that change what we were doing for God? Or is that a human aspect? Are these traditions and practices that as a faith community we have always done or are doing, have they become a barrier? Could something that we are doing, because we have always done it, potentially exclude someone? How do we address hypocrisy? How do we address moments when moral values and standards that we espouse don't actually align with what we practice? What do we do when our words and our behaviours don't match up?

What Jesus is inviting us to do today is to consider our intentions. To go deeper, to go to our heart. James provides us with some helpful practices in this matter. He implores us to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger. We are to rid ourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness and instead hold onto the Word of God. The teachings of God. The love of God. And we need to take this one step further: we need to not only be hearers of this Word

of God, but we also need to be doers of God's Word. For when we do what God asks us to do, we are showered with blessings.

A more modern version of this teaching by James comes from the Sufi poet named Rumi. Who believed that before we speak our words, they should pass through three gates: Is what we are about to say true? Is it necessary? Is it kind? So before we speak, our words are to pass through three gates: is it true? Is it necessary? Is it kind?

One of the stats I found this week is that humans, on average, roughly speak 16,000 words a day. We use these words to express ourselves, to describe things, sometimes to label things, to explain something...to persuade, to counsel, to deliberate, at times to deceive...just to name a few examples.

Archie Smith Jr., who is a minister, writes the following. He says:

“Words can alarm, harm, uplift, inspire, degrade or silence someone. They can reveal our inner thoughts. Words that are used in destructive anger or are revengeful are evil in speech. They do not bring about God's righteousness in the world.”¹

And yet, so often, some of these complaints I've received are people who believe they're doing this because God has taught them that this is what we should be doing. Our challenge today is to recognize how we, like the Pharisees, sometimes misinterpret what is important to God. We need to check in with ourselves about our judgements of others, especially in this sacred space. When someone comes into worship with dirt under their fingernails because they slept out in the street last night, do we, like the Pharisees, say they are not allowed to worship in this sanctuary? The answer, I'm happy to say here at Robertson-Wesley, is no. They are absolutely welcome to be in this space. When children move around a lot and sometimes talk during the worship service, do we act like the Pharisees and say, “Children need to sit quietly and not say anything.” Exactly – no. That is not how we work at Robertson-Wesley. When someone stands up when the rest of the people decide to remain seated, do we look at that person with scorn? The answer again is no.

I saw a meme on social media this week that said, “Before, religion made it all about what we believe. Jesus was all about how we love.” How we love one another is the Word of God that we are to hold onto today. We are not to let our human practices, and sometimes our needs and desires get in the way of treating people with kindness, with love, with respect. We again need to ask ourselves about our intentions in what we are saying to correct somebody's behaviour: Is it true? Is it necessary? And is it kind? Is it what God would want us to do? Is it how Jesus would love people?

¹ Archie Smith Jr., *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p.16.

We find our inner peace when we are connected with God. We find inner peace and we maintain it when we practice living our life in love and grace as God intended. Our inner peace is found when we truly understand what it is in our hearts before we speak. We need to take time to reflect on what is truly in our hearts. When we turn to God, when we focus on God, when we listen to God, and when we act in accordance with God's commandments, we are able to receive the generosity that God freely gives. That unconditional love, that true acceptance that God offers each and every one of us.

In the passage from James today, we are reminded of the true nature of God, which is to be generous. One of the most familiar doxologies, or what we have come to call the Offertory Hymn, is "Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow". When we come to worship, we are here to praise God and let God's blessings touch each and every one of us.

In our daily lives and our daily work, Jesus reminds of the importance of living a life of understanding, forgiveness, compassion, peace and generosity. And though there are many things in this world that try to distract us from this purpose, our faith in God and the teachings of Jesus help us to be intentional, rather than reactionary. When our inner spirit is at peace, what comes from within will help to bring peace to the world. It is not what goes in that defiles, it is what comes out. When our inner spirit is hurt, filled with anger or fear or distress, what comes out of our mouths can lead to harm. So we need to look to God for healing, for acceptance, for love, so that what comes out of our hearts reflects who God truly is. Jesus has asked you to fill your hearts with love. May it be so. Amen.