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Vain Worship

Mark 7:1-8

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?" (Mark 7:5)

I grew up in a faith community that didn't allow churchgoers to wear jewelry. No one wore engagement rings, wedding bands, necklaces, or bracelets. Even play jewelry—the pink plastic rings I'd pull out of cereal boxes, or the bead bracelets I'd make at a friend's birthday party—was banned. Anyone who showed up on a Sunday morning sporting "ornaments" could be denied communion.

As a child, I had no idea why God hated jewelry. I was told that my bare ears and unadorned wrists were visible signs of my wholehearted devotion to Jesus. I was told that storing up treasure in heaven is more important than wearing silver, gold, or diamonds on earth. I wasn't bold enough to argue with my elders, but in secret, I knew they were wrong. I knew that there was no correlation between bare wrists and deeper piety, because the rules didn't make me love God more; they made me respect God less. Why, after all, did Jesus want me to feel weird and excluded at school? Why did he care more about my outsides than he^d did about my insides? What was the point of parading my unadorned ears and wrists in church every Sunday morning, while my hidden heart seethed?

I only learned the whole story years later. Apparently, when my great-grandparents had been newlyweds, a large-scale charismatic revival had swept through South India, winning many converts from the ornate mainline churches of my forebears. Many young adults had embraced the simple faith the revivalists encouraged in those days, and decided—often at great personal and social cost—to change their lifestyles for the sake of the gospel.

One of the lifestyle changes centered around jewelry. At a time when gold was social capital in India, when even Christian families judged each other's worth by the weight of the jewelry their women wore, and girls whose

fathers couldn't produce enough jewelry for their dowries had to remain unmarried, the decision to forsake "ornaments" in the name of Jesus was a radical one. It spoke to the equalizing power of the gospel. No longer would my great-grandparents and their peers participate in the snobbery of their time and place; they would live counter-culturally and practice what Jesus preached, even if it meant losing their social standing and family honor. At great cost, they would embrace humility, simplicity, and equality as testimonies of Christ's non-discriminating love.

That was the history behind my church's "no ornament" rule. It was a noble history, but the problem was, its nobility had frozen in time. Our context had changed, and so had the cultural and social meanings behind wearing jewelry. What began as an earnest attempt to bring the sacred into everyday life had hardened into a loveless legalism. What started out as a gesture of radical welcome had become a tool of exclusion, self-righteousness, and rigidity.

The Gospel of Mark records an encounter between Jesus and a group of Pharisees who accuse Jesus's disciples of disregarding "the tradition of the elders" (Mark 7:1-8). Specifically, the Pharisees ask why some of Jesus's followers eat their meals with "defiled hands." That is, why they eat without performing the ritual hand washing expected of observant Jewish people.

To our modern ears, the accusation sounds trivial. But in fact, the Pharisees are asking a legitimate question, a question that still has relevance for us today. Consider the context: the first-century Jewish people among whom Jesus ministered were an oppressed minority living in an occupied land. How were they supposed to keep their faith pure and vibrant against the backdrop of colonization? In the midst of profound religious and cultural diversity, how were they to maintain their identity? Their integrity? Their heritage?

In Mark's story, the Pharisees' solution to the problem is to contain and codify the sacred. How can God's people show their faith among pagans? They can practice the ancient rituals of their elders down to the last letter. They can wash their hands before every meal; refuse table fellowship with tax collectors, sex workers, and other morally compromised sinners; and set themselves apart in everyday life as God's righteous people.

I can't speak to the Pharisees' intentions. But Jesus can—and he does. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, Jesus rebukes the Pharisees, saying, "This people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines" (vv. 6-7).

Ouch. But aren't the Pharisees just trying, like the people at my childhood church, to honor and protect the sacred? Aren't they making a noble attempt to serve God in a public, visible way?

It's important to note that Jesus doesn't condemn ritual handwashing in his response to the Pharisees. He doesn't argue that all religious traditions are evil. What he indicts is the legalism, self-righteousness, and exclusivism that keeps the Pharisees from freely loving God and loving their neighbors in ways that are relevant to their time and place. What he challenges is their unwillingness to evolve and mature for the sake of God's kingdom. What he grieves is the Pharisees' compulsive need to police the boundaries—to decide who is "in" and who is "out" based on their own narrow definitions of purity and piety.

Again, it's easy for us to look down on the Pharisees, but honestly, are we any different? Don't we often behave as if we're finished products, with nothing new to discover about the Holy Spirit's movements in the world? Don't we cling to spiritual traditions and practices that long ago ceased to be life-giving, simply because we can't bear to change "the way we've always done things"? Don't we set up religious litmus tests for each other and decide who's in and who's out based on conditions that have nothing to do with Jesus's open-hearted love and hospitality? Don't we fixate on the forms of piety we can put on display for others to applaud, instead of cultivating the secret and hidden life of God within our souls?

It doesn't matter what specific forms our legalism takes. In some churches, it centers around jewelry and clothing. In others, it comes down to deifying one worship style over another. In still others, it means policing the political affiliations and allegiances of parishioners. The guises vary, but in the end, legalism in any guise deadens us towards God and towards our neighbors. It freezes us in time, making us irrelevant to the generations that come after us. It makes us stingy and small-minded, cowardly and anxious. It strips away our joy and robs us of peace. It causes us, in Jesus's chilling words, to "honor God with our lips" but to "worship him in vain."

What can we do instead? How can we discern whether a tradition is life-giving or not? Jesus gives his listeners this advice: notice what comes out of you. Notice what *fruit* your adherence to tradition bears. Does your version of holiness lead to hospitality? To inclusion? To freedom? Does it cause your heart to open wide with compassion? Does it lead other people to feel loved and welcomed at God's table? Does it make you brave? Does it ready your mind and body for a God who is always doing something fresh and new? Does it facilitate another step forward in your spiritual evolution?

Like everything else Jesus offers us, his encounter with the Pharisees is an invitation. An invitation to consider what is truly inviolable in our spiritual lives. An invitation to go deeper—past lip service, past tradition, past piety—and practice a religion that liberates. Not a "safe" religion. Or an easy one. But a religion of the whole heart, more valuable than gold.