

Mark 7: 1-23 Religion and Religion-ness

I got to thinking after I selected the sermon title that I may have created a new word, or rather used something that was not actually a word. Religiosity is a word found in the dictionary, but didn't quite have the nuance I was seeking. I will start with some definitions and disclaimers to express what I was thinking. To begin, religion, according to Webster's dictionary has two frequent meanings. The first is a belief in a divine or superhuman power or powers to be obeyed and worshiped as the creator(s) and ruler(s) of the universe. That seems straightforward, and except for the inclusion of the plural, something we would agree with. The second meaning is that religion is the expression of such a belief in a specific system or structure involving a code of ethics or a philosophy. That also seems very clear and not controversial. Religiosity in Webster's is then characterized by adherence to the religion as a system. The system expresses concern with the appropriateness of behavior. That too seems clear. In the passage we have just read we have an account of an interaction between Jesus and some Pharisees. This interaction describes the tension between Jesus and those representing the religious system which formed the basis of belief for those who are following Jesus about the countryside. Our passage from Mark this morning is usually set apart as a unit with the subtitle "The tradition of the elders." Keeping in mind, that these subtitles are not part of the original Greek documents but were added much later in the transmission and translation of the text, what clue does it give to the passage's meaning? Mark tells us that Pharisees and some scribes have come down from Jerusalem to hear what Jesus is telling the people. What Jesus is doing has drawn the attention of those in authority at the Temple, those who are trained in the Torah and Jewish practices. We are told that these Pharisees criticize the actions of the disciples, specifically for their violation of the Torah rules for kosher foods. The Pharisees complain Jesus' disciples are eating with defiled hands. Mark carefully explains this means they have not washed their hands. Mark includes in his explanation a description of some of the ritual purity customs which are observed among the Jews. In the passage about this as reported by Matthew, the information about the washing of containers, etc. is not mentioned. The inclusion of that information in Mark probably reflects that many in Mark's congregation were not Jewish, but Gentile, and not familiar with kosher practices. Thus, he feels has to explain what the Jewish traditions in question were. When we read this passage we do so from the perspective of folks who have never been under those dietary restrictions or practices. The issue of whether or not to follow the rules of kosher foods found in the Torah was settled by the early church many years ago, but it was a contentious matter along with the issue of circumcision as those from non-Jewish backgrounds began to join what was at first a sect of Judaism. The question was whether or not you had to observe all the aspects of Judaism in order to be a follower of Christ. But for us, that issue was settled long ago. So what do we view as the message for us in this passage? When we read this passage from Mark, and

the similar one in Matthew 15, do we think about hygiene and eating habits? For totally non-religious reasons of hygiene we encourage the washing of hands before eating. The theme I have most often heard from this passage is about the freedom we have from Jewish dietary practices. Is that really what this is all about? Because a careful reading of the passage will show that Jesus does not directly address the issue obeying or ignoring the dietary teachings. True, the account is triggered by the disciples eating without washing their hands but that is not what seems to be the point Jesus focuses on. The restrictions which the Pharisees and Mark point out are indeed part of the Torah teachings. Jesus actually does not tell the Pharisees that what his disciples are doing is right, but neither does he say that the Torah teachings are to be abandoned although this and other passages like it are the reason we as Christian do not follow those teachings. The verses declaring this are actually set apart from what Jesus says in the text. Pharisees were known for observing the instructions in the Torah meant as standards for priestly behavior in the Tabernacle or Temple, believing this made them more righteous. These had been expanded as the religion of the desert wanderers became a nation and their religion became an institution. In fact, many ordinary people would not have followed these practices in their daily life. The Sadducees, another Jewish sect within the broader stream of Judaism did not follow the same precepts as the Pharisees. The disciples and followers of Jesus were not from the priestly tribe or Pharisees. It would have been unusual for them to follow those priestly practices. What Jesus does do in this passage is switch the conversation to a Torah teaching that was meant for all the people—one of the Ten Commandments Moses brought down from Sinai. The change in focus which Jesus makes is more about the authority behind the practices than it is about the specific practice. What is at stake here is the authority which backs up a tradition, not on a specific lack of cleanliness. It is about decisions which we make about how we treat each other. This is why Jesus throws the “tradition of the elders” thing back in their faces. Want to talk about tradition? Jesus asks. Then let’s talk about a tradition given at Sinai—you know the one—that tradition, no wasn’t that a commandment?—the one about honoring parents. It seems pretty straightforward—Honor your father and mother. In the Hebrew to honor carried the nuance not only of respect, but to care for—including financially. Here Jesus is exposing a loop hole that these religious leaders have used to avoid providing that support. Evidently they have created a practice which allows the declaration of their resources, their wealth, which they should have used to support their parents to fulfill this commandment to be instead a gift or offering to God. This practice is allowing them to keep it for themselves. In other words, Jesus is challenging them as to how their traditions contribute to them fulfilling their role as leaders of the society which God had decreed—one of justice where the individuals within the society were treated according to the Law given at Sinai. Which tradition—the one of the elders or the one given at Sinai—reflects the will of God. Which tradition leads to the cleanliness of life that is righteousness? This is where I believe we will find our message from God’s word for our society today. What do the traditions we cling to

as an individual, as a congregation, as a nation say about us in relation to the religion we claim to profess? What authority do we turn to for our choices? When I began thinking about this passage, I also began to think about a Broadway play, a musical, called Fiddler on the Roof. It opens with a prologue by the main character, Tevye. The play takes place in Eastern Europe in a small village where some Jewish families live during a time of religious persecution. In this prologue Tevye points to a fiddler sitting on a roof top playing his fiddle. Tevye's prologue goes like this. "A fiddler on the roof. Sounds crazy, no? But in our little village of Anatevka, you might say every one of us is a fiddler on the roof, trying to scratch out a pleasant, simple tune without breaking his neck. It isn't easy. You may ask, why do we stay up there if it is so dangerous? We stay because Anatevka is our home. And how do we keep our balance? That I can tell you in one word...Tradition." This leads into the song Tradition which describes the roles of each member of the family. Tevye then continues..."Because of our traditions, we have kept our balance for many, many years. We have traditions for everything...how to eat, how to sleep, even how to wear our clothes. For instance, we always keep our heads covered and always wear a little prayer shawl...This shows our constant devotion to God. You may ask, how did this tradition start? I'll tell you-I don't know. But it's a tradition...Because of our traditions, everyone knows who he is and what God expects him to do." In many ways, despite or maybe because of our rapidly changing technology and the culture around us, we may be like those villagers, trying to keep our balance through traditions. What the message from Scripture for us today calls for us to keep in mind that we need to know the authority behind the tradition. Is the tradition one God calls for us to keep, or is it something that our "elders" have given to us? Are we like Tevye and don't know the why of the tradition? Are we like the Pharisees who have given authority to a practice not meant to be a basis for community welfare? Mark's passage is not so much about cleanliness as it is about holiness and righteousness. Mark's passage ends with the words of Jesus which declare that it is the things which come from within, from our hearts and minds which can defile—our evil intentions. There is quite a list of sinful behavior given including envy, slander, pride and folly as well as specific deeds. I would add to that list of things that defile, fear. I think that fear causes us to hold on to our traditions without considering what the authority for them is. Jesus' life and ministry points out that God's spirit among us moves in unexpected ways. God does not place value on traditions which come from our need to keep our balance in the world. Instead we are called to seek the things God authorizes for the well being of all God's creatures. We are called to be more than clean, we are called to be righteous. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.