

THE NEVER ENDING STRUGGLE
Mark 7: 1-23

In all the tributes to Ted Kennedy, none touched me so much as the one given by Sen. Orrin Hatch of Utah. As you know these two men served together in the U.S. Senate for over three decades. Hatch noted that when he first campaigned for his Senate seat, he ran on a platform of going to Washington, DC to take on liberals like Ted Kennedy. Riding into town on his conservative Republican credentials, not to mention his Mormon faith, Hatch prepared himself to do battle with the Liberal Lion of the Senate, Ted Kennedy.

And sure enough over the years Hatch and Kennedy had many political battles, countless policy disputes. But a funny thing happened on the way to the forum, as they say. But Hatch discovered to his utter amazement that he grew to like Ted Kennedy. In truth, they became fast friends. Over time he came to love Ted Kennedy the winsome Irish gentleman of the Senate. They even worked together on legislation that has helped millions of our poor and disadvantaged citizens.

And along the way, Orrin Hatch discovered that what they had in common was much greater than what divided them. Only in America, in this richly diverse nation could a poor kid who grew up in Pittsburgh and then migrated to Utah become a dear friend of a privileged kid who grew up in New England. Friends come in all shapes, all sizes, and with all kinds of differences political as well as religious. And yet over the years these two sparring partners remained fast friends. Orrin Hatch could not hold back his tears as he spoke of his unlikely yet gracious friend, the liberal Democratic Senator from Massachusetts.

I have cried a lot this weekend. Cried for yet another loss for the Kennedy family. And another loss for our country, someone who truly reached across so many barriers to befriend supporters and even opponents. An amazing legacy, his political accomplishments, for sure. But just as amazing, the personal connections he made with people far and wide, the famous and not so famous, the powerful and the powerless. We have all lost someone who had a certain nobility, though he was not perfect, by any means. But in his humanity, he gave us a glimpse of what redemption and grace should look like. Caring, courteous, winsome, and kind. Orrin Hatch could not contain his tears. And neither could I.

I wish the story of Jesus had ended in such a lovely manner. In my imagination, I see his opponents coming to see at last the loveliness of Jesus. That despite their differences, they were all finally children of Abraham, committed to the same God who brought Israel out of Egyptian bondage. That they could come to appreciate this prophet in their midst who called them to a deeper spirituality, to a way that leads to true redemption and real freedom. Imagine for a moment, a gathering in Jerusalem where all of Jesus' opponents pay tribute to this rabbi unlike any other. But alas. It was not to be.

Jesus' opponents dogged him relentlessly, even came down from Jerusalem to Galilee to investigate him. And what did they find wrong with this teacher from Nazareth? The answer causes us to shake our heads in disbelief. The Pharisees pounced on Jesus because he and his disciples did not wash their hands in the correct manner before they ate. The ritual cleansing of the hands was not carried out properly-that ostensibly was the problem.

Now remember Jesus and his disciples broke no explicit commandment in the Mosaic Law. These ritual washings were simply customs and traditions handed down by rabbinical scholars. At stake here was the "oral law", not the written Law of Moses. In other words, these were folkways that had become binding on the people. Think of Tevya in Fiddler on the Roof singing about "tradition". The Gospel writer has to inform his Gentile readers perhaps in Rome that these traditions extended to many other customs, like the ceremonial washings of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.

Yes, this is what Jesus' opponents got bent out of shape about. You can just feel the steam rising from the neck of Jesus. This patient and long-suffering man had had enough and so he turns on his critics. He calls them hypocrites, citing the words of the prophet Isaiah: "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me." But it is worse than mere hypocrisy. Jesus claims that his opponents are actually dismissing the Mosaic Law in order to follow their own traditions and customs.

As an example Jesus insists that the custom of calling something "Corban" or dedicated to God is contrary to the Fifth Commandment, which reads, "Honor your father and your mother." By invoking a kind of oath that something is dedicated to God, that object-whether it is money or an offering of wheat or a house-now is specifically set aside for God alone.

And even if your parents are in desperate need, that asset could not be used to help them. That is because the tradition says that once the oath of "Corban" is invoked, the gift belongs exclusively to God. Remember this is

a society without Social Security. Aging parents were utterly dependent upon their children for care. So Jesus implies that the tradition about “Corban” actually could endanger your parents’ lives. And then Jesus tops it off by saying that his opponents do this kind of thing all the time.

The final assault on his critics is this: Jesus completely sets aside the huge distinction between clean and unclean. The world of First Century Israel was divided between the sacred and the secular. Already we have seen the divide between clean and unclean hands, between gifts dedicated to God and other assets. Now the issue is food, kosher and non-kosher food. It was an issue with which the early church struggled mightily. Here one gets the impression that the Gospel writer puts into the mouth of Jesus a solution that the early church arrived at much later.

Jesus’ solution actually seems to run counter to the Mosaic Law. Kosher food is more than a mere custom or tradition, the oral law. This is the Law of Moses that Jesus seems to challenge. However, we have no evidence that Jesus himself ever ate non-kosher food. So what exactly is Jesus’ solution? Surprisingly Jesus says that food does not make a person inwardly clean or unclean, any more than washing hands makes you inwardly clean or unclean. The disciples are pictured as not understanding this parable of Jesus. Neither did parts of the early church. This was difficult, because it involved the delicate issue of how to have table fellowship between Gentiles and Jews within the Body of Christ.

Jesus is said to have settled the food issue that divided Jews and Gentiles. To paraphrase him, “There is no food that makes a person unclean. Food just passes through our digestive system. That is not the issue. The issue is what comes out of your heart, the seat of your thoughts and intentions and imagination. That is the source of good and evil. The heart is what makes you clean or unclean.”

So what matters is not if you wash or do not wash your hands before eating. What matters is not some public oath that something is “Corban” or dedicated to God. What matters is not what kind of food you eat. What does matter is honoring the commandments of God. And what really matters are the thoughts stirring in your heart, the evil and the good that well up within you. That is what truly matters.

The externals are of little value if the heart is not stayed on God. This is what Jesus seems to be saying. And thus he subjects all religious tradition and ritual to this test—the test of sincerity. If the heart is not in it, it matters not at all how elegant the gesture is. What matters is the heart, the intention, the motive. That’s what matters.

It is a never-ending struggle to get to the heart of the matter, when it comes to religion. Religion like any other cultural artifact is filled with empty gestures and hypocritical traditions. There is not enough time to list all the mindless aspects of religion. In truth, one cannot be too critical of empty religious customs and practices. All this talk of hand washing and oath taking and food eating is beside the point, ultimately.

But one can never talk enough about authenticity and sincerity and truthfulness. There is something utterly winsome about committed people of faith. Those who take the faith seriously without taking themselves too seriously. Those who realize that most all that we do is tainted in some way or another with our own selfishness. So there must always be humility in what we do and what we say. There must be a daily discipline of confession that seeks forgiveness and wholeness. And a real commitment to prayer and meditation and most especially self-reflection. We admit finally that authenticity and sincerity and truthfulness stand before us more a goal than an achievement. We seek it, we want it, we desire it. And yet we know it is finally an elusive goal, an elusive goal indeed.

So this morning we come to worship God with our brothers and sisters. We are acutely aware that beneath all we do and say there is the matter of our heart. The heart-the seat of all that is good and bad within us. The heart-the source of all our best and all our worst. And so we commit ourselves yet again to that never-ending struggle to find “purity of heart”, a singleness of purpose to love God with all my soul and all my mind and all my strength. And actually to love my neighbor ever bit as much as I love myself. This is the never-ending struggle, the amazing adventure that Jesus invites us to undertake in his company.

It is a calling that is never complete at least in this life. And yet it is a calling that demands all we have and all that we are. Remembering the words of Isaiah, this becomes our goal: “To honor God with our lips, to direct our hearts to God alone, serving God whole-heartedly in all we say and do and think.” And always to remember this, to follow Jesus is a matter of the heart, the heart given over completely to the One who loved me and gave himself for me. This is our never-ending challenge. God help us, God be near us, God be our strength and our hope. Amen.