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# Hearing And Doing And Listening<sup>1</sup>

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## **Texts: James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-23**

I think we've all had the experience of hearing one side of a telephone conversation. Maybe it's at home where you can't help overhearing what your teenager is saying to a friend ... as you wait to use the phone. Maybe it's your spouse calling a contractor about some work on the house. Or, more recently, it's likely while waiting in a store or an airport when some guy whips out his cell phone and begins making LOUD TALK, and you wonder, *Is this call really necessary? Or is he just letting us know how important he is?* In all these cases you get only one side of the conversation, and it would be unwise to conclude that you really knew what the person on the other end of the line was saying.

That's exactly what we have in the New Testament readings for this morning: one side of two conversations. And it's not easy to make sense of that one side because we don't know what the other side of the conversation is.

Take the reading from James. Personally, I really like the Letter of James. It's straightforward, no mincing of words, with beautiful imagery. Yet it is a letter which Martin Luther praised but faintly! It's especially James 2:17 that gave Luther fits, where the author says that "a person is justified by works and not by faith alone."<sup>2</sup> But even in our reading for today there is this strong emphasis on *doing*, with only a hint or two of the grace which makes such doing possible.

What – and who – are we *not* hearing when we hear the author of James saying these things? Well, at the least we're not hearing the Apostle Paul. Because, as Lutherans steeped in Paul, we know that Paul said we are saved by grace through faith. We are not saved by our works, by the keeping of God's law. We are saved apart from that law by what Jesus Christ has done. We Lutherans have imbibed this message so thoroughly that we can make jokes about it, like the one

I heard when I was studying in Germany. A good Lutheran man is dying; his pastor comes to visit him and asks him if he is ready to depart. Just so the pastor will know that he's a good Lutheran ready to die, he says to the pastor, "Pastor, you can rest assured that I never did a good work in my life!"

Now that was the accusation that dogged Paul when he went from place to place. *Listen to Paul*, his critics said, *and you can do whatever you want*. As some modern wag has phrased that charge against Paul, "I like to sin, God likes to forgive; what a happy arrangement!"

Of course, that's nonsense, and on two grounds. First, if you read Paul's letters you see that again and again and again he's very concerned about how people live the new lives they have in Christ. Second, it is simply not true that God *likes* to forgive. "Likes" is the wrong word. The word that applies here is "love." And that love is not a casual thing. It is a costly thing. "God so loved the world that God gave his son ..." (Certain fans at football games keep reminding TV viewers of those words by the "John 3:16" signs they hold up for the camera.)

We may take all that for granted, but for Martin Luther it was a discovery he made only after much study of the Bible and much anguish and self-torment. Luther came to see that God is not only righteous and wants us to be righteous; God *gives* that very righteousness. God bestows it on us, as revealed to us in Jesus Christ. So we can forget about striving to make ourselves righteous. We can forget about perverting God's law by using it to gain status with God and with our neighbours. And that means – that means – we are set free to do what the law intends: to love God and to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. In the words of the Letter of James, we will be showing our faith through what we do, through our works.

In the Gospel reading we hear another one-sided conversation, not unrelated to the one in James. We hear what the writer of the Gospel of Mark says about the Pharisees, but we don't hear the Pharisees themselves speaking. The author tells us that the Pharisees and some of the scribes noticed that Jesus' disciples ate without washing their hands, that is, they ate with "defiled (impure) hands." The author of Mark explains that the Pharisees have certain rules about purity: they wash their hands before eating; they wash what they bring home from the market; they also wash "cups, pots, and bronze kettles."<sup>3</sup>

Well, we do those things, too. We wash our hands before eating, we wash our celery and carrots brought home from the market, we wash our dishes and pots and pans. We call it “hygiene.” The Pharisees call it “the tradition of the elders.” The author of Mark does not explain what that is, and we have no Pharisees here to explain it. Maybe we wouldn’t really want to hear what a Pharisee might say. After all, “Pharisee” is not a word we use in polite company. In fact, the word “Pharisee” was banned in the British House of Commons in 1902 along with “rat,” “jackass” and “hypocrite.”<sup>4</sup> But in Jesus’ day the Pharisees were the very models of faithfulness to God. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector makes sense only because Jesus could assume that the Pharisees were indeed looked up to as models of faithfulness to God’s law.

That law as spelled out in the first books of the Bible is rooted in a rural, village society. So you hear a lot about cattle and sheep and oxen, about sowing and reaping. But the Pharisees lived in a much more urban world dominated by Greek culture, similar to the way American culture blankets the world today. What would God’s law mean in that urban world? The Sadducees evidently replied: *That’s easy, forget those old rural rules; they’re irrelevant, they don’t apply.* But the Pharisees insisted: *No, God said to us in Leviticus, “You shall be holy to me; for I the Lord am holy and have separated you from the peoples.”*<sup>5</sup> The word “Pharisee” is related to the Hebrew word for “separate.” The Pharisees sought holiness by separating themselves, by setting boundaries marking themselves off from people like Jesus’ disciples who didn’t follow God’s law as the Pharisees interpreted it (another meaning of the word “Pharisee” is “interpreter.”<sup>6</sup> They called people like Jesus’ disciples “unclean,” and they wouldn’t eat with them.

We know about “clean” and “unclean,” especially since the SARS outbreak. *Wash your hands. Wear a mask and gown if you’re a health worker or visit someone in the hospital* – if you’re even allowed into the building! If you go into a public washroom today, you’re apt to find elaborate directions on how to wash your hands so as not to get contaminated, or not contaminate others through contact with them or through contact with food. We speak of cross contamination in handling such foods as chicken. People are wondering whether the beef in their freezer or refrigerator or in the supermarket is clean – safe to eat. Maybe we have as many rules

about clean and unclean as the Pharisees did, maybe even more since we know more about bacteria and viruses and epidemics.

And we also know about clean and unclean when it comes to people and peoples. “The great unwashed” is the way that modern sophisticates sometimes refer to the majority of the world’s population that doesn’t have ready and frequent access to water. Colour of skin has also been a huge boundary marker, and still is. Today is August 31, 2003. One week and forty years ago, on August 24<sup>th</sup>, I was in Washington DC. I was standing on the long grassy mall that stretches between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. I was there on that hot August day with 250,000 other people – black and white – as part of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where Martin Luther King made his famous *I have a dream* speech. Riding into Washington on buses that morning we got a glimpse of what that dream might mean: African Americans stood on the street and leaned out their windows, waving to us as we drove by, bus after bus after bus, and we waved back.

That was the dream. But the hard reality was that lunch counters and buses and housing were still segregated in the southern United States. In Princeton, New Jersey, where I lived – a progressive, upscale town for sure – there was a black ghetto, very well kept, but nonetheless a ghetto. And so some of us went door to door campaigning for affordable housing that would breach those ghetto walls. In many parts of the United States the most segregated hour of the week in the 1960s was 10:00 or 11:00 o’clock on Sunday morning when the church bells rang and blacks and whites went to separate churches.

Clean and unclean. Some people on this side of the boundary marker, others on the opposite side ... all in the name of religion and the Bible. Much has changed since then, much has not. Since September 11<sup>th</sup>, for example, Muslims and people of Near Eastern origin who are quite innocent of any wrongdoing are often marked off and stigmatized in various ways.

So what does Jesus say to the Pharisees, those models of piety? Forget about being clean or unclean? Forget about God’s call to holiness? No, he does not say that. Instead, he *redefines* clean and unclean. It’s not what goes *into you* that defiles you – what you eat, with unwashed hands. It’s what comes *out of you* that defiles you: theft, murder, adultery (there’s a whole list there in today’s Gospel reading). The evangelist comments that Jesus thus “declared all foods

clean.” But Jesus didn’t just declare *foods* clean. He declared *people* clean: you could sit down and eat with anyone, washed or unwashed! And Jesus did – with tax collectors and persons viewed as “sinners” and people from the street. He got a reputation for doing that.

We get a glimpse of that here at our Wednesday night suppers, where people from various walks of life and diverse backgrounds gather at one table. It’s a piece of Martin Luther King’s dream: the boundaries are erased.

Where do you draw your boundaries? Where do I draw mine? Maybe if I tell you some of my stories, it will get you thinking about your own stories and where you draw your boundaries.

Growing up during the Great Depression I was very aware of the boundary between kids on the south side of town and kids on the north side, that is, the boundary between the poor – like me – and those who weren’t poor. I’m still very aware of that boundary today and what it can mean to live on the poor side of the boundary, whether that’s locally or in the two-thirds of the world that doesn’t have the huge share of the world’s bounty that we do. I’m also aware that people in North America with many possessions are establishing gated communities – fenced-off communities – to shut the poor out; but it’s also true that we in North America and Europe are gating our nations and our prosperity off from the global poor. How long do you think we can keep doing that? And where do we think we might find Jesus sitting down to table today?

Think back to that reading from the Letter of James one more time. Notice how the author defines religion. He speaks of “religion pure and undefiled.” I don’t think of religion that way – as pure or impure – but from his Jewish heritage he does. And what is “religion pure and undefiled”? “Religion pure and undefiled,” says the letter, is caring for “orphans and widows in their distress.”<sup>7</sup> There were few social safety nets in those days, so the “orphans and widows” represent the most vulnerable in society. How a society, or a world, cares for the weakest in its midst is a measure of the care and justice in that society. And that’s not just a matter of individual or group initiative or action. Governments are involved. My colleague in the ministry way back used to say that after the Good Samaritan had bound up the traveller’s wounds and settled him into the inn, he should have gone back to Jerusalem and worked for a better police force to protect the weak and vulnerable.

Another obvious boundary is male and female. That boundary was one that Paul, the most famous Pharisee of all time, thought about a lot. As a teenager, I sure did too. And I took for granted the usual male role of male dominance. But along the way I learned to start listening to women, instead of what men said about women. I'm still learning to do that. My wife has helped me to do that, but it's not always an easy job for her. Women colleagues have also helped me listen. I have learned so much from them, and that has made a big difference in my scholarship and teaching.

Sexual orientation is likely the most disputed boundary issue today. There, too, I have learned to listen, to listen for the other side of a conversation that I wasn't listening to, as our National Church's "Caring Conversations" have urged us to do – to listen to what gays and lesbians say about themselves rather than what straights say about them. On this issue we desperately need to listen to one another.

Listening is an act of giving – giving of oneself, which is a very generous gift. The reading from James says all acts of generous giving come down from above. God gives us the gift of giving. And God's gift is a gift that keeps on giving. As Jesus says in the Gospel of Matthew, "Freely you have received, freely give."<sup>8</sup> To that I can only say, *Amen*.

## Notes

- 1 This sermon was originally preached at St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Kitchener, Ontario.
- 2 Helmut T. Lehmann, gen. ed., *Luther's Works*, vol. 35 *Word and Sacrament I* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), pp. 395-398.
- 3 Mark 7:3-4
- 4 W. D. Davies, *Introduction to Pharisaism*, vol. 16 of *Facet Books* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), p. v.
- 5 Leviticus 20:26.
- 6 *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Pharisees."
- 7 James 1:27.
- 8 Matthew 10:18.