

Sunday, September 2 + 15th Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 7:1-23

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Marshall, WI

Rev. Nancy M Raabe

[More about Holy Trinity](#)

[More about Nancy Raabe](#)

Just like there are a lot of Chadwicks in Marshall, there are a lot of Raabes in Southeastern Wisconsin, mostly in the Milwaukee area. This because my husband's father was one of six children, and most of them had several children. One of the older cousins married a woman named Nancy who everyone knew because she was the Homecoming Queen and then the longtime high school secretary. Bill told me long ago that she is the real Nancy Raabe, and I accepted my fate as secondary.

I've met some of the Raabe cousins at weddings and funerals, but I had never even heard of Pete until Bill's cousin Betsy, who tries to keep the extended family connected, realized that we forgot to notify Pete of Bill's father's death. We all felt badly and apologized, but after that I didn't expect to hear much more about Pete.

For that reason I was surprised when Betsy called the other day to say she had something to tell me about Pete. I braced myself for news of an accident or serious illness. But when she asked, "Are you sitting down?" I couldn't imagine what was coming.

What Betsy told me was this: "Pete is transitioning." A long pause. His name is now Jessica, she said. My first thought was for the sheer courage it took to enable the revealing of an identity that had been hidden to the world for so long. My second thought was how difficult this must be for Jessica's religiously conservative family to accept. (All the Southeast Wisconsin Raabes are WELS or Missouri Synod except for us.) Betsy said the couple had already been separated for awhile, but that, after the reveal, one of their two children had completely disavowed Jessica as father.

Jessica is transsexual. The term refers to those who experience a gender identity that is not consistent with their existing sex, and who seek medical assistance to transition to the gender with which they identify. I had worked with such a person named Jamie at a ministry in Ohio where I was involved for several years. Jamie was a tall, boisterously cheerful woman and one of our most dedicated volunteers. She was open about her process of transitioning from male to female. Most church members took it in stride, with the exception of one prominent female member. She announced that, when she was in the bathroom, she had a right to know "what was in the next stall," as she put it. After that announcement the pastor asked Jamie to use the unisex bathroom upstairs rather than the more convenient common restroom. Jamie never said anything, but I often imagined how she must have felt--as a key person in a key ministry who was denied use of facilities that were available to everyone else.

Of course, this was the way of life for blacks in America for much of our country's history, and it still is in many ways, although technically segregation has been outlawed. Our Gospel reading today addresses this issue of exclusion and exclusionary practices, and raises the question of where these impulses come from.

The overarching issue is the importance of distinguishing God's great commandment to love from human traditions that are rooted in fear—the fear of those in power from losing control. In fact, if you were watching John McCain's funeral, you may have heard Barack Obama say that much of the political discourse today is “a politics that pretends to be brave and tough but in fact is born in fear.”

Here in Mark, Jesus is critiquing the Pharisees' rigid enforcement of Jewish purity codes. Many of these rules involved washing—washing hands, washing food, washing things used for eating. When these were violated, the offenders were declared unclean. This prohibited them from entering the temple to worship, and therefore excluded them from participating in the life of the Jewish faith community. They were forbidden from publicly expressing their identity as people of God.

So it was with Jessica and Jamie: Jessica's true personhood is being denied by one of her children and who knows who else, and Jamie was denied full participation in the life of that congregation by having to use a remote, solitary bathroom.

Here in Mark, the Pharisees condemn Jesus' disciples who failed to wash their hands before eating. Jesus quickly turns this back onto them:

Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me;⁷ in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’”⁸ Jesus accuses them, “You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

Teaching human precepts as doctrines. Making human traditions, forms of bias and prejudice, into law. Of course, this practice is nearly as old as human history. All forms of discrimination are nothing other than traditions born out of fear and enforced by those in power by those who are terrified of losing control. In the modern age these include the Jim Crow laws in the South that denied blacks countless privileges enjoyed by whites; the raft of anti-Semitic legislation in Nazi Germany in the 1930s that were enacted to persecute people of Jewish heritage; and, today, the politically-motivated voter ID laws that make it harder to vote for those with fewer means, in tandem with the strategy of closing down polling places or removing voting machines in districts of that are prominently black or Latino.

Where do these impulses originate? From hearts that are consumed with concerns of the self rather than being filled by God’s love. Jesus gives us a laundry list of what comes out when the heart is consumed by these concerns of the self: evil intentions, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. What matters is not what enters the stomach, Jesus tells the Pharisees, because that only goes out into the sewer. What’s important is what resides in the heart and goes out from there into the world.

The hearts of the Jewish leaders were consumed by their piety, all these rules and codes that secured their positions of power. Isn't it the same with us? Whenever the way we have been taught to think and behave separates us from others, it also separates us from God.

Ask yourself honestly before God, right now: Who do you consider to be "unclean"? From whom do you prefer to keep a safe distance? All of us have prejudices of some kind which we don't even recognize, attitudes perhaps imparted to us by parents or the community in which we were raised. When and how are those expressed?

To wake us up to these, often we need the proverbial eye-opening experience. At my former church in Beloit there was a lovely older woman whose entire life was narrowly circumscribed and tightly controlled. She dressed perfectly. Her living room looked like a show house. Everything had to be just so. Then a black family moved in next door. She watched, first in surprise, then in horror, as other neighbors reacted negatively to the family and began to say and do things that made them feel unwelcome. Her response was to do the opposite: She made friends with the family, and over time they became like family to one another. In the course of this, she learned a lot about white privilege. "I never knew such a thing existed," she told me in amazement.

Jesus was always hard on the Jewish leaders because they represented the old order that was being turned upside down by the coming of God's kingdom. Therefore, we wouldn't normally think of identifying with them. Yet we may have more in common with the Pharisees that we think. We may be attempting to live faithfully, but within each of us there is still that temptation to judge those who do not live the way we do. This thinking sets us above them, and we may even come to think that we are more deserving of God's love than they are, just like the Pharisee in Luke 18, who truly thought he was being good: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people—thieves, rogues, adulterers, even like this tax collector." This misses the whole point of faithfulness, which is simply keeping one's heart open to God.

How do closed hearts become open? This happens when we allow ourselves to become vulnerable before God, perhaps through a crisis or experience of suffering. First, we acknowledge our own pain. Then we lay it at the feet of Jesus Christ, he who intimately knows the depth of human suffering because he himself has experienced it. He then gives us the strength to endure by telling us over and over through the Holy Spirit that life—living in the fullness of God's love now and forever--can never be overcome by death.

The good news of the gospel is that following Jesus is not about separating ourselves from those considered less holy or unclean. Following Jesus means that, just like him, we get our hands dirty serving others, caring especially for those whom the

world has cast aside. True faithfulness is not about clean hands, but cleansed hearts and lives shaped by the radical, self-giving love of God in Christ. Open your hearts to him.

(c) 2018, Nancy M Raabe