

Congruity **(Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23)**

Middle School.

I found it harrowing. Actually, when I was a kid, they called it “Junior High”—short for, “Junior High School”—a designation that, I guess, lost favor because it seems a bit condescending. Small, miniature version of the real thing.

Anyway, I remember moving to new schools, between my 5th and 6th grade year, and then again in the middle of my 7th grade year.

It’s tough on an introvert to be thrust into new situations, among a whole new crowd of unfamiliar faces—being singled out, afraid people are secretly talking about you, or worse, laughing **at** you.

It’s especially tough on a pubescent introvert to have to make those kinds of social and psychological adjustments.

When you're going through puberty, you're already so excruciatingly self-conscious. Every time you walk into a room, you're convinced that all eyes are on you, judging you—what kind of clothes you wear, your haircut, how you walk, whether you've got something gross caught in your braces or you have a new Vesuvian-size zit in the middle of your forehead that makes you look like a cyclops.

All of which is bad enough in front of people you know. To have to make that trek in front of a group of strangers, who are also supposed to be your new peers, is terror of a new and unspeakable magnitude.

When I walked into a new school in a different state for the remaining part of my 7th grade year, it was, all things being equal, awkward enough. But, unbeknownst to me, apparently, the folks in Michigan had moved beyond the early 70s infatuation with bell-bottoms and love beads in ways that people in northern Indiana had not yet done. So, when I walked into the new school and saw immediately that everyone wore straight-legged jeans

and no love beads, I immediately felt like a miscast character from a Cheech and Chong movie, a time-traveling retro love child.

As humans, a class of mammals, we maintain social boundaries. Those boundaries let us know who's in and who's out; which is to say, they let us know who we have to pay attention to, who we have to take seriously, and who can be harassed and ignored. Almost immediately. No long investigations are necessary.

Do they look right? Do they talk right? Do they know the customs that mark them as part of the tribe? Are they one of us?

That's how it works among humans, as much as among wildebeests and orangutans. We need to know who poses a threat to the herd. Who's been vaccinated, who wears a mask.

But whereas among animals, that kind of threat-detection system is a necessary part of survival, it no longer serves us humans

quite as seamlessly. The danger **we** fear has less to do with being eaten than with being polluted.

Jesus runs into just this kind of social impulse in our Gospel this morning. If you recall from the time we spent in Mark some weeks back, Jesus has been making new fans left and right ... but for all the wrong reasons.

Back in chapter six, Jesus fed the 5,000, garnering for himself the buzz of “potential candidate” for Messisahship. The crowds were convinced that Jesus could do for them what they had been unable to do for themselves, and were therefore prepared to immediately crown him king.

Jesus, not particularly enamored of the idea of throwing his hat into the political ring, took off by himself. After some time spent decompressing in isolation, he eventually stumbled across his disciples ... out in the middle of the sea—**them** panicking, and **him** walking on water.

After he and the disciples finally made it across, the folks Jesus had escaped from hours before, found him once again and started hounding him to do some more miracles.

Apparently, the religious leaders get wind of Jesus' new popularity, and decide to go check him out for themselves. When they find him, they catch sight of his disciples, who are blatantly not following certain customs about hand-washing.

Jesus sees what's happening. The Pharisees are doing what the rest of us do upon meeting new people, entering new situations: they've put their highly trained sense of smell to work, attempting to determine just who's part of the herd. Are these folks a threat to, if not our lives, then our **way** of life? Do they do stuff the way **we** do stuff? Which is another way of saying, do they care about things the way **we** care about? Are they with us or against us? Friend or foe? Comrade or threat?

And the Pharisees use the only sensors they have: custom. Of course, we know that custom sometimes get dressed up in church

clothes. It's easy to give stuff we care about a kind of theological turbo-charge, by saying that our personal prejudices and desires align with God's.

There a was a woman in a church I used to pastor who was always sweet to me. She had a great apartment on the bottom floor of a big old house, filled with treasures from a bygone era—lots of lace and flowers. You know what I'm talking about. Served me tea when I came to visit.

At any rate, Mary, who'd been born around the turn of the twentieth century was raised with certain ideas about what appropriate Christian behavior consisted of—and she wasn't afraid to let anyone know just what God thought about this or that particular question. I can't tell you how many times I got a call from one the people in the church who would groan, "Mary's doing it again."

"What did she say this time?"

“She told a visitor that we frowned on women wearing pants in church.”

“But we **don’t** frown on women wearing pants in church.”

“Yeah? Tell that to Mary.”

“She needs to quit telling people that stuff.”

“No kidding. We need to stop the opioid problem in Appalachia. You have about an equal shot of getting either of those things done.”

We know, don’t we? It’s easy to substitute **our** biases for God’s, convincing ourselves that God just doesn’t approve of things with which we also disapprove.

Anne Lamott said, “You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”

Ouch.

But it's one thing to carelessly assume that God's pretty much like **we** are, and so work to exclude people who don't live up to our idea of righteousness or acceptableness—which is a kind of narcissistic self-absorption.

That's how our Gospel this morning is often understood, as an admonition to get yourself sorted out on the **inside**. Make sure your motives are squared away. Don't be a hypocrite. Don't be all religious, and then also be a jerk.

Jesus even says something like that, right? "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrine.'"

"God doesn't like women wearing pants to church."

Read this way, it's easy to dismiss, because, generally speaking, people don't walk around viewing themselves as hypocrites.

“Obviously, Jesus is speaking to somebody else. I’m authentic. I’m not perfect, but I’m much more like the non-hand-washing disciples than the squinty-eyed religious leaders.”

But here’s the thing: Sometimes our threat-detection sensors aren’t tuned just to tell **us** from **them**, to reassure us that **we’re** all right. Often, we dogmatize our opinions and customs as a way of maintaining power, protecting our positions in the pecking order by keeping “those people” out.

After moving to a new middle school and getting the whole bell-bottoms thing straightened out, I finally made my way into that select group, affectionately known in everyone’s middle school experience as “the popular kids.” I got invited to parties with kids who lived at the top of the heap. I felt pretty good about myself.

“Finally,” I thought, “we can put that love-beads thing to rest once and for all.”

I skated through my whole glorious 8th grade year. I loved it. I felt like one of the princes of a particularly exclusive little kingdom.

But then, in 9th grade, without asking my permission, some of my friends started trying to widen the circle, inviting **new** people to be part of the “popular kids.”

As wrapped up as I was in my own adolescent life, I realized that I couldn’t just say out loud: “Look, we’ve got a good thing going here. Let’s not goof it up by inviting more kids. That’s just going to destabilize an otherwise stable system—a system by which I benefit.”

Even **I** knew I couldn’t say that without sounding like a jerk ... but, man, did I **feel** it.

I, who a little more than a year prior had been at the bottom of the social heap, languishing in passé fashion trends that would

have made Greg Brady squeamish, had somehow climbed to the top, and I didn't want anyone threatening my perch.

Kind of reminds me of those 1st and 2nd generation immigrants, who've made good, but who now want to pull up the ladder behind them—make sure nobody else gets to climb up.

Sometimes, they're the ones yelling loudest about how we need to secure our borders ... you know, keep **those** people out. Hear it? Not **my** tribe any more; they're **those** people.

That's what's so interesting about our text for this morning. The Pharisees, in Jewish history were, by and large, considered to be the "good guys." Much of what the Jewish law had been concerned with had to do with temple worship.

The problem? The temple was in **Jerusalem**—a pretty good distance from the outlying areas, especially Galilee, where Jesus and the disciples were from. Moreover, there had been significant chunks of Jewish history when there **was** no temple, or the temple had been destroyed.

So, along came the Pharisees over a hundred years before Jesus was even born. They eventually brought the revolutionary idea that Jews should be able to practice their faith **wherever** they were—whether or not they could get to Jerusalem and the temple to offer a proper sacrifice.

The whole hand-washing thing? Initially, it was a way of liberating people from the difficult-to-observe temple regulations, allowing common folks to observe purity requirements—in the comfort of their very own homes (many of which were a long way from Jerusalem).

See what I mean? Initially, the Pharisees were concerned to open up the faith as wide as possible.

However, what that draws attention to is that by the time of Jesus, the Pharisees' move toward theological liberation had come to be a social boundary marker—a quick threat-detection system that worked not to open up the gates to full participation as

widely as possible, but to set up obstacles to new folks joining the “popular kids” at the party.

The Pharisees insistence on dressing up customs in dogmatic clothes became a way to retain power by keeping “those people”—you know, the **wrong** sort of people—out.

In the last part of our text for this morning Jesus lists the stuff that comes from within the human heart that defiles. He names all the big ones, from fornication to murder. He wants to point out that it’s not the external stuff that’s a problem—like whether or not you wash your hands. The real problem comes from within. Hypocrisy isn’t just a personal idiosyncrasy; it’s a big part of what drives people away.

“See? They talk a good game, but when it comes down to it, they’re just selfish and insecure.”

But Jesus knows the dangers of sounding righteous and pure, while you’re secretly wallowing in cruelty and exclusion—of saying

one thing in the breathy tones of piety or patriotism, while simultaneously doing what you need to in order to retain power and influence. In other words, you better get it right on the inside first ... because the inside is where God is, and the inside is where God is calling you to throw open the doors and invite everyone, to embrace those who are different from you, to love those who look and talk in ways that are foreign to you, those who make you uncomfortable because you're positive they don't meet your exacting standards of propriety and decorum, those you're sure God can't possibly love the way they are.

And even after all this time, the church is often just as quick to erect barriers to keep people out, turning customs into dogma, human precepts into doctrine.

Unfortunately, many people's experience of the church is having the ladder pulled up just as they reach for it.

“Thanks for inquiring. But we’re just fine in here. We’ve already got things pretty much the way we want them ... I mean, the way **God** wants them.”

Getting things right on the inside is what Jesus commands, so that those folks on the outside can find a home.

Jesus says, “It’s not what’s on the **outside** that’s causing the problem for those who want to follow anyway. It’s what’s on the **inside** that causes the problems.”

So, the question is: What treasured customs and human precepts are we willing to set aside so that we can get things right on the inside, finally providing welcome to those on the **outside** seeking entrance?

When people walk through our doors wearing life’s equivalent of bell-bottoms and love beads, can we find a place for them at the table?

If we're going to be true to the Jesus who welcomed us when **we** were on the outside, we'd better figure out a way.

—Amen.