

## **Tattletales from Jerusalem**

*September 3, 2006*

(Pentecost 13 - Year B)

Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

*St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas*

Last week, I talked to my brother and sister in-law on the phone. And, they were telling me stories about their daughter, who is my little niece, Elizabeth.

Now, my niece, Elizabeth is 4 years old.

Elizabeth is sweet and pretty and very, very cute.

Yet, as her uncle, I must admit that I am just a little bit biased in my opinion about her.

But, from my conversation with Elizabeth's parent, it seems that Elizabeth has also been somewhat of a tattletale recently.

Elizabeth has come to her mother saying:

"Mommy, when I was in the car with Daddy, he ran a red light."

Or, "Mommy, my friend at school said a bad word."

My brother and his wife are trying to teach Elizabeth the difference between right and wrong.

Yet, they are also trying to teach Elizabeth that nobody likes a tattletale.

They are trying to teach her to be a good moral person, yet also to know when she should mind her own business.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus has just been going into villages and cities and farms, and healing everyone that he touches.

But, then the Pharisees and some of the scribes come up from Jerusalem. They come from Jerusalem and notice that some of Jesus' disciples are eating with unwashed hands.

For, you see, one of the ancient Jewish traditions was to ceremonially wash one's hands and cooking utensils.

So, the religious leaders who have come from Jerusalem ask Jesus:

"Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?"

I can just hear the tattletales from Jerusalem confronting Jesus in the same tone that my niece Elizabeth would use:

“Jesus, your disciples just ate their chicken nuggets, but they didn’t even wash their hands.”

Then, Jesus shoots back at these little tattletales from Jerusalem:

“Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites.

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human traditions.”

But, back to my niece, Elizabeth.

One of the things that Elizabeth has learned to do, to her parent’s regret, is that Elizabeth has learned to tattle on someone else in order to deflect attention away from herself.

Elizabeth has come home from school saying:

“Mommy, Mary Kate pushed me off the monkey bars.”

Yet, in reality, Elizabeth was not the one who was pushed off the monkey bars.

Actually, Elizabeth was the one who was pushed Mary Kate off the monkey bars.

And, Elizabeth has been tattling on girls in her 4 year old class, to deflect the attention away from her own bad behavior.

The Pharisees and some of the scribes come up from Jerusalem.

They come from Jerusalem and notice that some of Jesus’ disciples are eating with unwashed hands.

So, the religious leaders who have come from Jerusalem ask Jesus:

“Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”

Which makes me wonder:

Maybe this situation in Galilee is much like what my niece, Elizabeth, has experienced.

Maybe, it is not just the disciples who have dirty hands, but it is the Pharisees and the scribes who have dirty hands as well.

Maybe the tattletales from Jerusalem are hypocrites because they try to deflect attention away from their own bad behavior.

For, we are hypocrites when we tattle on others to deflect attention away

from our own behavior.

And, we are hypocrites when we hold on to human traditions and abandon the commandment of God.

And, just what is the commandment of God?

If you notice, Jesus does not say “*commandments* of God” with a plural “s.”

Jesus says the commandment of God, commandment being singular.

And, that commandment of God is found in the 12<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the Gospel of Mark, five chapters later than today’s reading.

There, Jesus is asked by a religious scribe:

“Which commandment is the first of all?”

And, Jesus answers:

“The first is this:...

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength.’

The second is this:

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

There is no other commandment great than these.”<sup>1</sup>

The commandment of God is love:

Love of God and love of neighbor.

There is no other commandment greater than this.

Yet, we tattle on others and hold onto human traditions, to deflect attention away from own *unloving* behavior.

We gossip and speculate about the marriages of others, deflecting attention away from our own marriage.

We tell God in prayer about all the things that our boss does wrong, yet we fail to address our own shortcomings.

We argue in our churches about the color of the carpet, the type of music that is sung, the version of the Prayer Book, the rightness of our viewpoint, all of which deflects attention away from loving the

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 12: 30-31

poor, the sick and the hungry.

We come up from Jerusalem and tap Jesus on the shoulder, interrupting his ministry to the poor and the sick, to tell him:

“Um, Jesus.

We notice that some of your disciples were eating with undefiled hands.”

To which Jesus has every right to wheel around and reply to us:

“Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites.

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

We abandon the commandment of God, the commandment of *love*, when we try to tattle on each other.

We abandon the commandment of love, when we try to deflect attention away from our own sins, to point out the dirty hands of someone else.

The Apostle Paul writes in his famous 13<sup>th</sup> Chapter to the Corinthians:

“If I speak in the tongue of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge,

And if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.”<sup>2</sup>

Without love, all of the traditions of the Pharisees, the traditions of handwashing and kettle cleaning and kosher food requirements, are nothing.

Without love, all of the traditions of the Episcopalians, traditions of good liturgy and short sermons and great parties, are nothing.

Without love, we become tattletales, looking to deflect our own sins onto someone else.

In a moment, you will be invited to confess your sins against God and your neighbor.

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 13: 1-2

You will be invited to follow that Great Commandment once more:  
To love God and to love other people.

For, we do not come to this church in order to point out the sins of  
others.

We come here to be forgiven for our *own* sins.

We do not come to this church to hold on to human tradition.

We come here to love God and to love each other.

We do not come to this church to tap on Jesus' shoulder and tattle about  
dirty hands.

We come up from Jerusalem to *hold on* to Jesus' shoulder,

And to be healed and fed...and loved.

AMEN.

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