

The Kind of People We Want To Become

Deuteronomy 4:5-14

Mark 7:1-23

“But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life....”

In her latest novel, *Clock Dance*, Ann Tyler begins with a personal note. “I believe,” she writes, that our entire lives can be shaped by a single decision that we make during childhood as to who, exactly, we should be. As to *how* we should be, what kind of people we want to become.” At age seven, Tyler arrived at a single life-shaping decision after six years of studying her “sharp-tempered and erratic but very bright mother” and her “steady, patient, gentle father.” At age seven, she made up her mind to be the steady one. Then, she says, “I turned eight and never had another significant insight.”

I found myself thinking this week about what leads us to make a decision early on in life, or maybe not so early on, concerning the kind of persons we want to become as I read and reread the tense interchange that begins Mark’s seventh chapter. In the company of the confident Pharisees, the clueless disciples and a contentious Jesus, I heard Mark inviting us to decide today who and how we should be the people we want to become as followers of Jesus Christ and members of his church.

Now when Israel was deciding who and how to be God’s people, they began with the commandments given to Moses at Sinai by the God who had brought them out of Egypt. According to Walter Brueggemann, the intent of the commandments is to institutionalize the Exodus by establishing a people whose “perspectives, procedures, policies, and institutions...will practice God's justice instead of pharaoh's injustice ... [practice] neighborly well-being instead of coercion, fear and exploitation.” Significantly for where we are headed this morning, the Exodus was not a “one-time rescue” but required a decision to live in a particular way with one another under God’s rule that had to be remembered and reenacted moment by moment, Sabbath by Sabbath. Because God is a God who is *forever* delivering human beings from bondage, it is God’s ongoing deliverance that is the intent of the commandments.

Yet in living under God’s rule moment by moment and Sabbath by Sabbath, Israel came to believe that “there [was] no circumstance in which [God did] not will something concrete.” Clearly more than Ten Commandments would be needed to help them be the people they wanted to become. In response, two distinct codes of interpretive commands were added, codes that addressed the changing context of Israel’s life and codes that had everything to do with the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees in Mark’s Gospel as well as with the conflict among various stripes of Christians today! Like Ann Tyler’s parents, each code presented a distinctive way of being and becoming the people of God in the world.

I am now going to tell you more than you ever wanted to know about these interpretive commands! The first are the purity codes. Found largely in the Priestly writings--especially Leviticus--they reflect “the theological sensibilities and needs of [people] who experience life as profoundly disordered, and who have no doubt that [God] has provided concrete disciplines whereby life-threatening disorder may be overcome.” Here we read of proper sacrifices and offerings, of valid ordinations so that priests may be trusted to be reliable transmitters of God’s order, of “the right ordering of food, the purification of women after childbirth, the management of bodily discharges,” and so on and so forth. The theological stinger that compelled God’s people to obey the purity laws was the threat that the holy God would withdraw from a people who themselves were not pure, were not holy. You can trace the purity code forward to the Pharisees, then to a theologian named Arius in the fourth century who believed the church to be the gathering of the morally perfectible rather than a hospital for sinners and on to today wherever you see a bunch of Christians leaving one congregation to form a more pure congregation.

The second set of interpretive commands involve distinct practices of *social justice* required by God of God’s people that contrast Israel’s Exodus ethic to the surrounding Canaanite way of life. Here the Sabbath command was central and decreed practices of rest such as: debts canceled every seventh year so that there would be no permanent underclass; a Jubilee year every fiftieth, in which family land lost in the give and take of business is returned; provisions for “runaway slaves, for refusal to charge interest to Israelites, for protection against seizure

of a poor person's property as equity for a loan, for prompt payment of wages to the poor, for care of the socially [marginalized]....It is clear," Brueggemann concludes, "that this tradition of commands intends that social power must be in the service of justice." According to Mark, you can trace the interpretive tradition of justice forward to Jesus.

But by the time Mark wrote his Gospel, the Jerusalem religious establishment had also created an additional oral tradition known as the "tradition of the elders" that further interpreted the purity code. When the Pharisees notice the disciples "eating with defiled hands," they ask Jesus why his disciples are not living according to the tradition of the elders. Mark reminds his readers that this tradition required the Pharisees to wash their hands thoroughly before they ate, to wash everything from the market; and to wash cups and pots and bronze kettles. Reasonable practices, right? What is not evident in Mark's text is the way the tradition of the elders functioned to benefit the Judean elites who made up about 5% of the Jewish population. According to Presbyterian preacher Steven McClelland, "The elites lived in towns and cities and had access, time and money for the water needed to follow the Pharisaic interpretations of what constituted cleanliness. The [other] 95% of the population who didn't have easy access, time or money to water were commonly referred to by the Pharisees as the Am ha'aretz—which means "the dirty people of the land." Essentially the Pharisees are asking Jesus why his disciples are acting like the dirty people of the land, people with whom the Pharisees can have nothing to do if they are to maintain their purity for the sake of their relationship with the holy God. Jesus is asking the Pharisees why they have chosen the injustice of their purity ethic over the justice of the Exodus ethic.

I think Mark is using this story to ask his community then and to ask us now to decide what kind of people we want to become as followers of Jesus Christ. To see Jesus through the interpretive code of purity or the interpretive code of social justice is to recoil or rejoice as, throughout the Gospels, Jesus is touched by the woman with an issue of blood and touches the lepers to heal them; it is to chastise or cheer him as he speaks with the Samaritan woman at the well or eats with tax collectors and sinners; it is to revile or revere him as he takes on the religious establishment and brings good news to the dirty people of the land. Yet it is easy to rejoice and cheer and revere him from the distance of his redeeming love for characters who lived two thousand years ago. Who, then, are the people with dirty hands today? The answer is fraught in partisan times such as these, though if you do not at least include the parents and children separated at our borders, then I do not know who you are becoming. But equally daunting is the realization that to decide to be and become the person whose life with God is defined by purity is necessarily to reject being and becoming the person whose faith finds you dining with dirty hands among people with dirty hands!

I thought about this, about the decision we make early on or maybe not so early on in life concerning the kind of persons we want to become, not only as I read and reread these lessons, but as I watched the service for John McCain at the National Cathedral yesterday morning, and particularly as McCain's favorite character in Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was invoked in one of the eulogies, though not with the words McCain himself had borrowed as he bid the nation farewell. Contrary to Ann Tyler's belief that our entire lives can be shaped by a single decision made when we were seven as to what kind of person we want to become, Hemingway's Robert Jordan echoed the daily decision required by the Exodus ethic: "Today is only one day in all the days that will ever be. But what will happen in all the other days that ever come can depend on what you do today." In the context of Mark's Gospel, I take that to mean that discipleship is not a one-time decision but requires us to decide today to live in a particular way with one another under God's rule. It is a decision that has to be remembered and reenacted moment by moment, Sunday by Sunday, until the day we die.

On this Sunday, the invitation is Jesus' invitation rather than Mark's. He invites each of us to come to his table with dirty hands, invites us to dine among people with dirty hands. But the gospel is this: who you will become in all the other days that ever come depends not on what you do and decide but on the decision of the God who is forever delivering people from bondage, on the decision of that God to be with us from the beginning in him who dirtied his hands for us in the breaking of bread. Thanks be to God.