

Fourteenth Week After Pentecost (RCL/B): Kosher Meat “Riots,” Pharisees & Us
James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
August 28-29, 2021
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Anyone with a love of history or of New York City would enjoy a visit to the Tenement Museum on the Lower East Side. I’d heard of it a while ago and finally made time to go there with Pastor Mark on our recent vacation. You don’t simply walk through on your own: you take a guided tour on a topic of your choosing. Mark & I are fully vaccinated so we qualified for an indoor tour. We picked one called “Tenement Women: 1902.” We visited the 4th floor walk-up three-room apartment of the Levine family: living room, kitchen and 1 bedroom for parents and 3 children, including an infant. By the way, the husband made the living room into a garment factory, so that left kitchen and bedroom for wife and 3 kids during the work day. (Use of the kitchen was shared by the “presser” of the finished clothes, since there was no electricity and the iron had to be heated on the coal stove!) There was no indoor plumbing in 1902, so the outhouses were 4 floors down in the backyard, located uncomfortably close to the water pump, the only source of fresh water for the five floor tenement building with its twenty apartments....

It was the second part of the tour that relates to today’s Gospel. On the basement floor of 97 Orchard Street, Manhattan, was the home/kosher butcher shop of Goldie Lustgarten and her family. Their shop was only open for a few years. Part of the reason for that was what the secular press called “The Kosher Meat Riots.” Show of hands, please: has anybody heard of them? Me neither! They weren’t actually riots; boycott is a more accurate term, but the anti-Semitic, anti-immigrant prejudice of the secular press was evident in its reporting. Listen to this contrast, described in an article I found:

The **Yiddish** press supported the protest... [and] ran the headline, “Bravo, Bravo, Bravo, Jewish women!” By contrast, the *New York Times* called for the repression of this “dangerous class . . . especially the women [who] are very ignorant [and] . . . mostly speak a foreign language.”¹

The issue was that the Beef Trust in Chicago (where the slaughterhouses were) raised the price of Kosher meat 50%, from 12 cents to 18 cents/pound, in one fell swoop. The ladies who were already pinching their pennies to feed their families couldn’t afford the increase. For a week or so the local Kosher butcher shops refused to buy from the Beef Trust to force them to lower prices, but that didn’t accomplish anything. So in mid-May of 1902 about 20,000 Jewish women took to the streets, boycotting the local butcher shops, throwing an occasional brick through a window, setting up picket lines and accosting anyone who dared to cross the picket line to buy meat, grabbing the package out of her hands on the way out, stomping on it and pouring gasoline over it. By June 9, less than a month later, the price dropped from 18 cents/lb. to 14 cents/lb. The ladies prevailed.

One lady pleaded with the boycotters, “But my husband’s ill; he **needs** meat!” And the boycotter reminded her that in an emergency he could eat meat that was “tref,” meaning non-Kosher. The wife of the sick husband probably wasn’t agreeing with that. Today’s Gospel reminds us how incredibly important the Jewish dietary laws were in our Lord’s time. They remain so today in Orthodox and Conservative Judaism. The laws govern **what** can be eaten, **how** the animal must be killed and prepared, **what combination** of foods can be eaten together. (Those of you with Orthodox family or friends know they have different sets of dishes for meat and dairy. Some even have different refrigerators. You don’t mix meat and dairy. I was reminded of this when I ordered half and half with my tea at a Kosher deli in Freehold. There is no half and half in a Kosher deli!) In Jesus’ time there was also a law about with **whom** you could eat: only

other observant Jews. This is why Jesus was criticized and even rejected by some: He ate with tax collectors and sinners, which made Him **very** suspect!

I haven't often chosen to preach on this Gospel. When I have, I've focused on Jesus' words: "*Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.*" (Mark 7:14b-15) But studying this last week, I came across an interesting insight: we Christians too quickly label Jewish dietary practices unnecessary or pointless, including the ritual washing of hands. I always assumed there was some hygiene element to it all. (How many times in our lives have we asked a child before a meal, "Have you washed your hands??") But there's more to it than that.

The Pharisees get a bad rap because in the Gospels Jesus criticizes them, pointing out they miss the forest for the trees: they miss the main thrust of faith, love of God and neighbor, because they're obsessed with every tiny little rule. For instance, before today's Gospel, Jesus had fed the 5,000-plus, walked on water and healed many. But when they're in His presence, what do they notice? Some of His disciples don't ritually wash their hands before eating. (We're not talking scrub-a-dub with a bar of soap. Ritual washing entailed about an eggshell-and-a-half of water poured over the hands, fingertips up, with a fist rub, and then the same amount of water poured over the hands, fingertips down.)

But instead of focusing on the Pharisees' obsession with rules, let's talk about **why** they loaded the day with ritual: to make all of life come under God's watchful eye. They sewed God-awareness into the fabric of their lives. Think of how central **eating** is to our lives. On Maslow's hierarchy of needs, food, clothing and shelter are at the **foundation**, the **base** of the pyramid of what we humans need to live and thrive. No food, no life. So why

not let food remind us continually of our Creator, its Source, our Source? In his *Small Catechism* Martin Luther includes a blessing before meals as part of a family's daily faith practice. As Christians we don't separate meat and dairy, we don't reject shrimp cocktail, we enjoy a good BLT, but we do well also to turn our eyes to Heaven each time we eat.

Maybe you're struggling to convince your family to come to worship with you, but short of that: saying a blessing before meals is a wonderful way to thank God together and to remind the fam that faith isn't a one-hour-a-week gig or a Christmas/Easter blip on the chart. Morning and evening prayers are also helpful ways to weave God into our daily lives. I have a ritual of saying a prayer every time I get behind the wheel, too. Jesus didn't reject the Pharisees' rationale of bringing God into everything. What He critiqued was practices of piety that stopped with the individual and didn't extend into one's dealings with others. This is highlighted in today's epistle from James, which urges us to "*be doers of the word, and not merely hearers*" (James 1:22). Our faith in God must **become** something, must inform our **actions**. The word "undefiled" used for hands in today's Gospel comes up in the letter of James, too. James puts it in a nutshell:

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress.... (James 1:27)

It's not "either/or" but "both/and." It's not **either** worshiping God **or** serving our neighbor. It's **both** worshiping God **and** serving our neighbor, as best we can, throughout the day, throughout our life, as individuals **and** as a community. Amen.

¹Michael Felding, PhD, "Jews in America: The Kosher Meat Boycott (1902)," *Jewish Virtual Library*.

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