

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

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

Deuteronomy 4:1-2,6-9

Psalms 15

James 1:17-27

September 2, 2018

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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One of my favorite children's books, *Mr. Peabody's Apples*, tells the story of Mr. Peabody, a small town baseball coach who was one of the nicest guys in town. Every day he would walk down main street, waving and smiling at the folks that he passed. And every one waved back. And every day he would walk by the local grocer and pick up the shiniest red apple from the fruit stand outside and then he would keep going probably taking a big juicy bite as he walked. On one particular summer day, after baseball practice had ended, he walked past the fruit stand, picked up his apple and walked on as he always did. But on this particular day, Tommy, one of the boys from his baseball team saw him pick up the apple and walk away without paying.

Tommy couldn't believe what he saw and he ran to some other boys and told them that Mr. Peabody was stealing apples. Well, the boys told their friends, the friends told their parents and the parents told their neighbors.

The next day, Mr. Peabody shows up to practice and no one is there. Then, one little boy named Billy steps onto the field and Mr. Peabody asks him where everybody is. Billy tells him that everyone thinks he is thief because he was stealing apples. Mr. Peabody is quiet for a moment – he knows immediately what had happened - and decides to walk Billy to the fruit stand. But as they walk through town, no one waves at Mr. Peabody. In fact, some people just look away.

When they arrive at the fruit stand, the grocer comes out and waves at Mr. Peabody and says, "Good morning! Would you like an apple this morning?" Mr. Peabody says, "Sure, if it's OK that I take it early." The grocer says, "Of course it is! You always pay at the end of every week when you pick up your milk. Take whatever you would like."

Billy is stunned and runs to tell Tommy what he had learned. Tommy in his regret goes to visit Mr. Peabody to apologize for the rumor that he had spread. Tommy asks what he can do to make it up to Mr. Peabody. Mr. Peabody takes him out to the ball field and carries a feather pillow with him. It was a windy day. Mr. Peabody tells Tommy to cut the pillow open. The request seems strange but Tommy is desperate to make it up to Mr. Peabody so he cuts open the pillow. Mr. Peabody shakes the feathers out and as he does the wind picks up thousands of feathers and carries them far and wide. Tommy breathes a sigh of relief and says, "Is that all I have to do to make things better?"

Mr. Peabody looks at Tommy and just says, "Now I want you to pick up the feathers." Tommy is confused. He says, "Mr. Peabody that's impossible. I can't do that." Mr. Peabody looks down at Tommy and says, "Of course you can't. It would be just as impossible to undo the damage you

have done by spreading that rumor.” That’s the power of your words. It doesn’t matter what things may look like, what matters was the truth. And we often so quick to judge that we never take the time to learn what the truth really is.

Assumptions and judgements. As we dig into our Gospel this morning, let me just say ...there is no way to sugar coat the difficulty of today’s reading from Mark. Either you are squirming in your seat because you feel as though a finger is being pointed at you (if you are like Tommy in our story) or you may find yourself being reminded of a time someone made an assumption about you (that is if you are like Mr. Peabody).

And then there is word that comes up in Mark. This very hurtful word...hypocrite. Simply defined, hypocrite is a person who *pretends* to have virtues and morals but when put to the test doesn’t live into what they say they belief. That might be Tommy in our story...and his friends and his parents and their neighbors who thought they had some kind of moral high ground but became trapped in their own need to judge and point fingers before ever even asking what was really the truth.

You know...mudslinging and name calling is easy. Accusations and finger pointing take very little courage. And, patting yourself on the back for having the moral high ground is a trap we can quickly fall into if we aren’t careful.

Because aren’t we always sizing each other up?

Today’s Gospel asks us to take a step back and look at our own intentions, our own reactions to a situation and our own assumptions of one another. And that’s not an easy thing to do. This is where we find the Pharisees in Mark – sizing up the disciples – angry that they hadn’t followed religious protocol. And they are full of accusations.

To prove a point...do a little creative interpretation with me this morning...when the Pharisees come in to the gathering, what were the disciples already doing? They were already eating. And what do the Pharisees claim has happened? They claim that the disciples haven’t washed their hands. (Remember washing one’s hands was considered the “right” thing to do. It was a religious and social imperative of that community). The Pharisees quickly begin to accuse and blame and criticize the disciples for not following the rules, for not being morally or ethically correct.

But I want you to notice something...does the text tell us that the disciples did not wash their hands? Does it tell us what they were even doing BEFORE the meal? No. We don’t know. It seems that there are simply a lot of assumptions going on here...assumptions about a situation, about a group of people and the Pharisees don’t even know in the full context of what has happened. They just begin to judge. Here is the problem.

Like Tommy who tells his friends and who tell their parents and who tell their neighbors, the Pharisees go running to Jesus, wanting their story to be picked up and validated. Notice that

Jesus never falters. He simply turns the tables on the Pharisees and calls them hypocrites. It's an interesting turn of events. The Pharisees were so busy pointing their fingers at others that they failed to recognize their own miss-judgement. They were so busy wanting others to mess up that they made accusations, built a false narrative, and hurt others all because they didn't take the time to understand the situation.

Here's what I think...the Pharisees weren't all bad. They were trying to follow the rules and keep order and do the right thing; however, in their effort to do good, they failed to show compassion and grace. They failed to begin with love and understanding. They may have professed to be the right kind of religious person but they didn't practice what they preached.

So maybe the Gospel this week is a good reminder that when we think we are getting it right, when we have put our beliefs on a pedestal, we may want to take a step back before we jump to conclusions about anyone or anything who is doing something different that we are. To stop waiting on pins and needles for others to mess up, to stop looking for other people's faults and start looking at the good right in front of you.

Guess what? There is an interesting universal truth to the Pharisees mistake. When you look for someone to mess up, do you think they will mess up? Of course – because we will always find something wrong with someone else if we look hard enough. Whether their actions are wrong or not, we will find ways to accuse, and blame, and criticize...all the while thinking in our hearts that we have the right answers.

But remember from our children's story: It doesn't matter what things may look like, what matters is the truth.

And so, why is this text from Mark so uncomfortable for us? Maybe because we have all been like the Pharisees or like Tommy. And it's a hard realization to take a close look at ourselves and recognize that at times our hearts aren't always as generous as we would like to believe. That we are all going to judge and criticize and blame. That's human nature.

If that is human nature, then what is the response to this wake up call to our hypocrisy? I had to think about that one. Not that it isn't evident – because the evident answer is to simply stop being a hypocrite. That at times may be like telling a 2-year-old to stop jumping around a room. It will probably keep happening. But I was wondering about a more tangible way to understand the counter balance so I looked up antonyms to the word hypocrite. And I found that the direct opposite is integrity.

Proverbs 11:3 states, "The integrity of the upright guides them..." Plain and simple. Integrity is defined as the quality of being honest and having moral standards. But it also implies that you actually live by those standards, that you develop an internal consistency to the principles that you hold. That you practice over and over what that looks like even when it's hard. There is no pretending, no talking the talk but not walking the walk. It's coming back to what we know and believe and actually doing it.

So if you believe in honesty, practice honesty. If you believe in forgiveness, practice forgiveness. If you believe in grace, practice grace. If you believe in mercy, practice mercy. If you believe in unconditional love, practice unconditional love. And if you fail, recognize where you have failed and try again. You won't be able to pick up all of the feathers but you will pick up some. And those feathers matter. As James 1:19 reminds us – be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger. That's a good place to start when we talk about integrity. And might we add for today's purposes...be slow to judge. Because it doesn't matter what things may look like, what matters is the truth. Amen.