

McCabe United Methodist Church
“Just A Little Dirt”
Pastor Art Scanson
August 30, 2009

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15

A teacher observed a boy entering her classroom with dirty hands. She stopped him and said, “George, please wash your hands. My goodness, what would you say if I came into the room with hands like that?”

With a smile the boy replied, “I think I’d be too polite to mention it.”

One mom was frustrated by how often her four-year-old son, Brian, was getting dirty playing outside. At wit’s end, she finally said, “Brian, can’t you play someplace where it’s cleaner?”

“If God didn’t want us to play in the dirt,” Brian logically said, “why did he make so much of it?”

Brian’s comment brings about this information. Earlier this year the *New York Times* had an article by Jane E. Brody, [Babies Know: A Little Dirt is Good for You.](#)

She writes, “Ask mothers why babies are constantly picking things up from the floor or ground and putting them in their mouths, and chances are they’ll say that it’s instinctive - that’s how babies explore the world.” Here’s the conclusion of many scientists: eating dirt is good for you.

Studies of what is called the hygiene hypothesis, researchers are concluding that organisms like bacteria, viruses and even worms that enter the body along with “dirt” spur the development of a healthy immune system.

Dr. Joel V. Weinstock said in an interview that the immune system at birth “is like an unprogrammed computer. It needs instructions . . . Children raised in an ultraclean environment are not being exposed to organisms that help them develop appropriate immune regulatory circuits. Children should be allowed to go barefoot in the dirt, play in the dirt, and not have to wash their hands when they come in to eat.” He points out that children who grow up on farms are much less likely to develop allergies and autoimmune diseases.

Mark’s gospel tells of some Pharisees and other teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem and observed some of Jesus’ disciples eating food with unwashed hands. He goes on to point out that all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the traditions of the elders. So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with “unclean” hands? Listen to our scripture reading - Mark 7:1-8, 14-15.

Jesus didn’t take to kindly to their criticism, reminding them that Isaiah was probably right in his words, *“These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. . . You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.”*

We need to notice that this was not about keeping traditions. As traditions and ceremonies are important as they remind us of our responsibilities. What bothered Jesus here was their being sticklers for their traditions but so blind to their responsibilities to other people. Remembering the great commandment of loving God, and traditions and ceremonies help us express our love for God. Then comes the second commandment - to love your neighbor as

yourself. Ah, this is where the rub comes. The Pharisees come up woefully short.

The Pharisees were those supposedly “set apart,” which meant, more was expected of them. Yet they were like everyone else, they were more interested in their own agenda than in God’s agenda - which is the redeeming of the least and the last. So, where do we fit into all of this?

We need to see that it is good to keep traditions and ceremonies. There is no evidence that Jesus did not keep the traditions of his people. He was in the temple on the Sabbath, a student of the Hebrew Bible, regular in prayer. People who provide a healthy foundation for our society are those who respect tradition.

In 2005, Ryan Sandberg was inducted into the baseball Hall of Fame. Here is how he described his devotion to the institution of professional baseball:

“I was in awe, every time I walked onto the field. That’s respect. I was taught you never, ever disrespect your opponents or your teammates or your organization or your manager and never, ever your uniform. You make a great play, act like you’ve done it before; get a big hit, look for the third base coach and get ready to run the bases.”

Sandberg motioned to those inducted before him, “These guys sitting up here did not pave the way for the rest of us so that players could swing for the fences every time up and forget how to move a runner over to third. It’s disrespectful to them, to you and to the game of baseball that we all played growing up.”

“Respect. A lot of people say this honor validates my career,” said Ryne Sandberg, “but I didn’t work hard for validation. I didn’t play the game right because I saw a reward at the end of the tunnel. I played it right because that’s what you’re supposed to do, play it right and with respect. . . If this validates anything, it’s that guys who taught me the game. . . did what they were supposed to do, and I did what I was supposed to do.” (David Broder,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/27/opinion/27brooks.html?ref=opinion>

Many people would call Sandberg old fashioned. And perhaps he is. But respect for tradition is important for holding things together—whether it is a game of baseball, culture, or a community of faith/church. For us at McCabe it is to carry on the tradition of ministry given to us by God. We are in the beginning stages of a stewardship campaign for the indebtedness of our building. As a church family we made our commitment and pledge about six years ago when we strongly voted to go ahead with the building project. We did so out of respect for those who have gone before us in the McCabe church family tradition. Soon we will be asked once again to make a financial commitment out of respect for the tradition of ministry by the people of McCabe. As they have been the ones who have taught us the work of God’s church. The tradition of caring for the soul of those who are with us now and those who will come after us. It is the respect for tradition of loving our neighbor as ourselves that will hold things together.

Traditions are good, however they are no substitute for a vital commitment to God and to our neighbors.

What would the church (McCabe Church) be like without rituals? Rituals, traditions, ceremonies help hold our lives together as we’ve just noted, but they are to be a means to an end. The purpose of life is to glorify God and to serve our neighbor. This is something that the world simply doesn’t understand.

I will not be surprised if sometime tomorrow, August 31st, we will see on television some kind of remembrance of Princess Diana. That will be the 12th anniversary of her death in a

tunnel in Paris as a result of a high-speed crash. They will not doubt also include her companion and the driver. It was one of the top ten stories of 1997. She was a 36 year old princess that captured the imagination of the world.

In contrast and to make my point that the world doesn't quite understand our calling as God's people to serve and care for our neighbor, let me suggest that on the same day 12 years ago there was another death. There was a little nun in Calcutta known to the world as Mother Teresa. We can only hope that the media will recall her life and death as well. As it has been said that Mother Teresa chose the wrong day to die. But maybe that is the way it should be. Nothing could better reflect how warped the values of the world are. Mother Teresa wasn't accompanied by a billionaire playboy when she passed from this life. She lived and died serving the least and the lowest. She lived and died glorifying God and serving her neighbor.

There is nothing wrong with little girls aspiring to grow up to be princesses. But how much better, though, if all of us aspired to be more like Mother Teresa? As most of us will not live or die in the midst of pomp and circumstance, but most of us can live and die serving the least and the lowest. There is nothing wrong with ritual and tradition and ceremony that finds us being committed serving in God's name. Even if it is to be found where we will get a little dirt on oneself.

Here is the lesson for today:

-The meaning of life is not what rank in life we achieve, or even how observant we are of the high and holy days of our faith.

-The meaning of life is to live in such a way that our life brings glory to God, and the world is a better place because we have been here.

The goal of life is to make sure we have a clean heart as well as clean hands.

September 13th - 20th McCabe will be having a Ministry Fair, where each of the boards and committees and small groups will have displays on tables in the Great Hall and hallways telling of what they do and how you can get involved. Would like to have all of us put those dates on your calendar and plan to come early or stay late from church and visit these areas and commit yourself to getting involved in serving and expressing your love for neighbor through the ministry of McCabe.