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Year B  
Ordinary Time Proper 17  
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Song of Solomon 2:8-13  
Psalm 45:1-2, 7-10  
James 1:17-27  
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

### Increase in Us True Religion

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love.

If you want a sneak peek into what's about to happen in our Episcopal worship service, it's a good idea to pay attention to the Collect of the Day. A collect is simply meant to gather the intentions of the people and the focus of worship into a succinct prayer. It "collects" the main idea of the day's worship. In today's collect, we pray for God to "increase in us true religion," preparation for the contrast between the true religion of Jesus and the false religion of the Pharisees in our gospel reading.

I have a soft spot for the Pharisees, despite their self-centered indignant righteousness and the fact they are often total jerks. It wasn't always that way. The Pharisees and scribes were legal experts who studied the Torah with a passion. Their desire, ostensibly, was to gain a greater understanding of God's commandments and deepen their obedience to him. Beginning around the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century before the birth of Christ, their earnestness developed an oral tradition – the "tradition of the elders" referenced in today's reading. In their zeal for Judaism, the great moral teachings of the law were gradually amplified, expanded, and broken down into thousands and thousands of rules and regulations. By the time of Jesus, the Pharisees had turned their religion from a means into an end, from an affair of the heart to an outward form of external observance.

This is not the first time in Mark's gospel Jesus is criticized for failure to adhere to rigid legalistic standards that presumably proved he was unclean and profane. He touched and healed a leper, a ritually unclean and marginalized person. He ate with sinners and tax collectors, opening himself up to being defiled by sharing a meal with the defiled. He allowed his disciples to forage for lunch, plucking heads of grain on the sabbath in direct contravention of the core of Jewish identity. And under the watchful scrutiny of those in the synagogue, he healed a man with a withered hand, also on the sabbath. And so the official delegation of Pharisees sent from Jerusalem to investigate Jesus in today's gospel are not innocently inquiring as to why his disciples haven't washed their hands. Their question is an accusation, a gathering of evidence in their conspiracy efforts.

The Pharisees infer Jesus' disciples are sinners and Jesus confronts their hypocrisy. "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites," Jesus roars back, citing the prophet who echoed God's disappointment and dismay. "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." Note that in no way does Jesus deny the validity of Mosaic law. This is not an anti-Jewish passage or a weaponizing of Christianity against Judaic tradition. Jesus is rejecting the Pharisees and their *exploitation* of Mosaic law, not contempt for the law itself. The law and religion are good gifts from God, and we are meant to practice them diligently. Jesus affirms that. But like all of God's good gifts they are subject to use or abuse. The ancient rite of hand washing originated with God's instructions to his priests. We emulate it even today as Mother Laurie cleanses her hands before consecrating the bread and wine. Somewhere in the tradition, though, what started as legitimate religious symbolism became the Pharisees' spiritual playacting. The law became a tool of oppression and judgment, a yardstick for "who was in" and "who was out." Religious hypocrisy, of course, did not begin or end with the Pharisees. Our own

Christian tradition bears scars ranging from the sale of indulgences to the forced assimilation of indigenous children in Christian boarding schools and much in between and beyond. “Increase in us true religion,” we pray in our Collect because we recognize we are always susceptible to false religion. We recognize we are always susceptible of spiritual hypocrisy. As the cartoonist Walt Kelly warned: “We have met the enemy and he is us.”

The entire range of Christian tradition — the Lord’s Prayer and the Great Litany, rosaries and revivals, Prayer Book and Hymnal, icons and incense, Bible study and Sunday school, Gospel music and Gregorian chant, public liturgy and private prayer, sacraments and sermons, holy water and holy rolling — the entire range of Christian tradition, in all its diversity and complexity, serves one great, overarching purpose: Love God. Love your Neighbor. We can cross every “t” and dot every “i” on whatever checklist of religiosity we choose to adhere to, but unless we are grounded in love, we are, as St. Paul famously wrote, “a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” signifying nothing. Our Christian traditions are meant to help gain and maintain a new heart, a heart grafted, as our Collect states, with the love of the Name of the Lord, a heart that is compassionate not selfish, a heart that is humble not arrogant, a heart that is welcoming not judgmental. When Jesus teaches “it is what comes *out of* a person that defiles,” he is identifying the source of our corruption. He is pointing to the limiting shadows of our humanity that pollute and defile. He is summoning us to an honest self-examination of the heart so that our heart can be opened to him.

The best way I know to begin the courageous and dangerous journey of self-examination of the heart is in prayer. So, I’d like to conclude by inviting you to join me in reading again our Collect of the Day:

Rite I: Lord of all power and might, who art the author and giver of all good things: Graft in our hearts the love of thy Name, increase in us true religion; nourish us with all goodness; and bring

forth in us the fruit of good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Rite II: Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things: Graft in our hearts the love of your Name, increase in us true religion; nourish us with all goodness; and bring forth in us the fruit of good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.