

Proper 17 B
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
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“Iron Sharpens Iron”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, ‘Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?’ He said to them, ‘Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.” You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.’ Then he called the crowd again and said to them, ‘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.’ For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.’

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As the author of Mark’s gospel tells it, the Pharisees and scribes came from Jerusalem and gathered around Jesus. They took note that the disciples had not performed the ritual cleansing of their hands. Ready to

confront Jesus, the stage had been set for another epic showdown between Jesus and the Pharisees.

As a kid, I knew that the Pharisees were Jesus' arch enemies. They were the stand-in villains – the bad guys of every story. They fought with Jesus, were threatened by Jesus, and colluded with Rome to execute Jesus. Beginning with Mark, the authors of the canonical gospels capitalized on the apparent enmity between Jesus and the Pharisees – a narrative that gained traction with Matthew and Luke and reached its zenith in the Gospel According to John. What if, though, Jesus' anti-Pharisee posture wasn't actually his position at all, but was reprojected onto Jesus by the authors and later interpreters of the gospels?

During Jesus' day, the Pharisees were an important political and religious party of reformers, bent on a more democratic form of Judaism, distanced from the hereditary inheritors of the priesthood and Temple cult, the Sadducees. The Pharisees advocated for a form of Judaism that brought Jewish ritual and observance out of the Temple and placed it squarely in the hands of ordinary people. After the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, it was the Pharisees who reinterpreted the tradition and facilitated the formation of Rabbinic Judaism, the form of the faith that still exists today, centered in local synagogues.

Beneath the text of animosity between the Pharisees and the Jesus of the gospels, is a subtext of mutual care, concern, and even friendship. Jesus and the Pharisee Nicodemus purportedly engaged in lengthy discussions and the latter paid for Jesus' funeral expenses (John 3, John 19:39). When the wicked king Herod wanted to kill Jesus, it was the Pharisees that came and warned him (Luke 13:31). Jesus regularly ate in the homes of Pharisees (Luke 7:36) and it was the Pharisees that were seemingly always in the audience as he taught – engaging with him, questioning him, debating with him.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg points out that, “Arguing and questioning and debating is what the Rabbinic tradition is all about . . . they're doing their

thing together: Jamming (on the Jewish law) in the name of the Lord.”¹ Sure, they disagreed with each other, but “through the process of playing out their disagreements, sharpened one another’s thinking.”² This is a part of Rabbinic culture. Ruttenberg says: “We throw hard. And then we go to each other’s houses for Shabbat dinner. We sanctify the disagreements.”³ What if what we read as enmity in the text of the gospels was, as Proverbs says, a case of iron sharpening iron (Proverbs 27:17) – of scholarly equals engaged in informed debate for the purpose of mutual growth? What if Jesus was actually a Pharisee himself?

This is precisely the claim of Rabbi Ruttenberg. This is the claim argued by Rabbi Evan Moffic in his book *What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Jewishness of Jesus: A New Way of Seeing the Most Influential Rabbi in History*. This is the claim argued by a number of other Rabbis and scholars, both Christian and Jewish. “Interesting,” you may be thinking, “but why does that matter for me?”

It matters for us today for at least three reasons. First, it matters that we have the most complete picture possible of the personage at the heart of our own Christian religious tradition. Second, it matters because millennia of antisemitism have been fueled by misinformation about Jesus’ relationship to his own Jewish religion, from cradle to cross. Third, it matters because the ongoing debate between Jesus and the other Pharisees can provide a helpful framework for discussing contentious matters in our own time. If our debates begin from a place of mutual respect for one another, then we play out our disagreements and sharpen one another’s thinking, and finally sit down together for a meal, we might find that the possibility of moving forward together isn’t quite as difficult to imagine. I think that’s why so many church meetings end with potluck!

¹ Danya Ruttenberg. “Jesus and Beit Hillel,” *Lifeisasacredtext.com*, August 5, 2024: <https://www.lifeisasacredtext.com/jesus2/>.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

The truth is, we can't ever know for certain whether or not Jesus was in fact a Pharisee. We can see, however, numerous parallels between Jesus' teachings and the teachings of other influential Rabbis from his time. We can see how good debate has the potential to sharpen both parties' arguments. We can see how individuals who really, truly care about their people might end up with very different notions of how best to serve them. We can conclude that sharing food after a good argument helps to diffuse tensions and humanize one another.

I, for one, choose to see the twinkle in the Pharisee's eye as he publicly goads Jesus about handwashing. And I choose to hear the good-natured "challenge accepted" in Jesus' voice as he responds by calling his adversary du jour a hypocrite before razzing him about what really defiles a person. After all, iron sharpens iron. We needn't fear confrontation nor a good honest debate with people who treat one another as equals. And afterward, it's okay to break bread or have a beer with "the enemy."

We are called to rise above the modern-day tendency of demonizing those we disagree with. We are called to treat one another with dignity and respect as fellow human beings. Jesus says, "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you," (Matthew 7:12) or as the famous Rabbi Hillel put it first, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor," (Shabbat 31a). May it be so with us. Amen.