14th Sunday after Pentecost

**“The Commands of God, The Tradition of Men”**

Mark 7:1-9 / August 29, 2021

**Taliban**

Afghanistan is a living hell now. The Taliban regime has set a deadline for foreigners to leave Afghanistan on Aug. 31, and many people who were flocking to the airport to escape may have lost their lives. Meanwhile, a terrible suicide attack happened last Thursday. More than 170 people died, and more were injured. The Taliban is violent, but the IS, who carried out the suicide bombing attacks, is known to be more violent than the Taliban.

Some Middle Eastern experts say that Al-Qaeda is scarier than the Taliban, and IS is more extreme than Al-Qaeda. Originally the Taliban were Pashtun people living in southern Afghanistan. A civil war broke out between various tribes in Afghanistan after Soviet Union forces that occupied the country withdrew in 1989, and one of them, the Pashtun, formed a militant group named the Taliban, overpowered other tribes and finally took the power in 1997.

However, the Taliban hid Osama bin Laden of Al-Qaeda, who was behind the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and the US invaded Afghanistan in 2001 to overthrow the Taliban regime. The U.S. forces captured most of the city in a week, but after 10 years of missing bin Laden, they found and shot him while he was hiding in Pakistan in 2011. After that, the United States was unable to resolve the persistent political divisions and conflicts between tribes in Afghanistan, but recently made the decision to completely withdraw the United States.

We often think of the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, or IS as just militant terrorist groups, but we must remember that they are fundamentally religious people. It is because of their religious beliefs that the Taliban makes it mandatory for women to wear burqas and prohibits women from engaging in social activities entirely. It is also because of their religious beliefs that they brutally kill people of different creeds and beliefs.

The faith to save oneself and others is being used as a tool to kill oneself and others as well. We are reaffirming how harmful distorted and extreme religious beliefs can be through the current situation in Afghanistan. I don’t think this perverted belief only happens within certain religions. Even in different forms, there is a distorted belief in Christianity, which often confuses the Christian faith.

**Pharisee**

In today’s text we meet people with distorted religious attitudes. They were the religious leaders in Jewish society at the time. These are the Pharisees and teachers of the law. They openly hated Jesus for not following their religious rules and traditions. So they deliberately watched what Jesus was doing to catch Jesus not keeping the law, and when they saw his disciples eating food without washing their hands, they officially took issue with it.

Originally, the law required only priests to wash their hands. Later, through the decisions of the elders, this rule was extended to what all Jews should abide by. It was not just because of hygiene; it was because of an excessive obsession with religious cleanliness. According to the tradition of the elders, no one could eat food unless they washed their hands, and when they returned from the market, they had to wipe the items off to eat food because the items that they bought from the market might have been touched by an unclean person.

The Pharisees were not satisfied with the law they had inherited from Moses. In order to keep the law more thoroughly and perfectly, they began to create an expanded set of laws by adding more specific practical provisions to the existing law. For example, they made detailed rules for people not to misuse the name of the Lord, to keep the Sabbath day holy, to honor one’s parents. Thus, the law, which started with ten commandments, was later extended to 613 commandments.

This extended law was often referred to as the “tradition of the elders,” and Jesus called it the “traditions of men.” The biggest problem with the extended law, called the tradition of the elders, was that those who kept the detailed rules well had a sense of pride and arrogance, and that those who did not keep them were branded as undevout people. The true meaning of God's commandments disappeared, leaving only the external issue of whether to keep the tradition of the elders well or not.

When the Pharisees asked, **“Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with ‘unclean’ hands?”** Jesus replied, **“Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: " 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.' “You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.” (Mark 7:6-8)**

In other words, Jesus scolded them as “hypocrites.” In Greek, ‘hypocrite’ means an actor who performs wearing a mask. The outer appearance with the mask and the real appearance inside the mask are different. The Pharisees acted as if they were pious on the outside, but on the inside, they were full of pride and self-righteousness in keeping the detailed and strict rules well. It had nothing to do with true piety. They were real hypocrites who constantly judged people who did not do as they did and branded them as sinners.

If Islam has the Taliban, Al Qaeda and IS, Judaism has Pharisees, scribes, and teachers of the law. They have surprising similarities even though they look different. They turn living religious teachings into dead ones, judge and blame people rather than love and embrace them, and exclude and reject people because they are different from them. They act most religiously, but in fact they are the furthest people from religion, and they are dangerous people who destroy the world and the human soul.

**A Genuine Christian**

Let’s look back on ourselves. Unfortunately, many Christians have similar attitudes. Rather than trying to live according to the gospel, they try to keep the doctrine, judge people rather than embrace them, and exclude and reject people if they are different. They have too many laws about what should and should not be. They value human tradition more than the word of God, and the doctrines made in particular circumstances more than the everlasting gospel.

During my ministry, I’ve often met people who insisted on their religious beliefs in the church. They were those who complained that they could not understand the absence of Apostles’ Creed in the order of worship, those who claimed that it was not right to give sacrament to unbaptized members, and those who criticized the pastor for not wearing a robe during worship. These days, some even argue that Christians should not support the Democratic Party, nor should they be given the Covid vaccine.

I want to ask. Where did they get those laws? How did they come to regard them as an imperative law that cannot be compromised? Are those really important to our faith? They are not meaningless at all, but after all they come from certain special situations and human traditions. What is important is not human tradition but God’s commandments. God’s commandments are not just laws or rules, but spirits or attitudes. The tradition of men is not important, but God’s commandment is important.

Then how can we follow God's commandments, not human traditions? I will replace that answer with the words of Paul the Apostle. Paul once wrote a letter to the Roman church. The Roman Church consisted of Gentiles, mostly first-time believers. So they were confused about how to believe in Jesus. A few Jewish leaders in the church who led them at the time were teaching that thorough keeping of the law was a good way to believe in Jesus. Paul contradicted that in the letter to the Romans.

St. Paul summarized in one word what the core of the law is and what it is like to keep the laws in Romans 13. He unified the core of Jewish law and the core of the Christian gospel. He emphasized that the core of the law is not to keep the laws, but to practice love. This is also a message to the distorted believers, who are trying to change the living commands of God into the dead doctrines, to judge rather than embrace people, and to exclude others endlessly.

**“Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. (Romans 13:8-10)**

Our goal is not to be a religious people. It is to learn Jesus’ teachings and the gospel and to become a mature and beautiful human being. Our goal is not just to be a good believer. It is to walk down the path of life in the direction the commands of God pointed at. It is no other than a way to love each other, a way to love our neighbors as ourselves. That is the way to keep the commands of God, and the way is to save you and me, and this chaotic world.