

## “Moving from Ritual to Spiritual”

Mark 7:1-9

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This scripture is difficult partly because it is so strange. Most of us shake our heads in bewilderment when we hear how upset the Pharisees were about hand washing, defilement and ritual cleansing. Today most Christians dismiss the book of Leviticus because it talks about such things. We do so at the risk of dismissing the heart of Judaism, which was to “be holy as I am holy.” (Lev 11:44)

This scripture is also difficult because it’s not all that clear what we’re supposed to do today, how we’re supposed to move beyond ritual to redemption. With wonder & puzzlement, let us together listen to God’s Word. . .

*Mark 7:1 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, and all the Jews, 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.*

The Reverend Matthew McCall picked at his hands as he waited for the small, motley group of elders to come in the door. It had been his task, these nine months, to guide the Mt. Moriah Fellowship back into connection with the larger Church, to bring them back into the fold. He was supposed to be a liaison. He was supposed to mentor a Mr. James Sims, lay pastor, a person not at all committed to the denominational way of doing things. It was a tall order, as these types of assignments often are.

Honestly, it was a burden. Something he’d rather not do. It was like digging a hole at the beach. The more you dig, the more the hole fills up. Besides which, the worn out place was way out in the country. It took over two hours just to drive

out there, and there wasn't one decent spot to eat in that tiny little excuse for a town, once he left late of a Sunday morning.

It was the kind of town that sags. The kind of place people are from, not the kind of place where people go. It had been a coal mining town. The only hint of that left was the name. The town had long since forgotten the mines and the black ore and the money that had once poured through it.

The Reverend McCall had been well primed. "You know, I hear Sims is a heretic. His theology is suspect. We don't know what's going on out there. They're out in the boonies. Nobody goes out there." "I'd be willing to bet they don't do *anything* by the book." "They haven't had anybody out there in months to preside over communion, or to baptize. Not that they've had anybody TO baptize!"

"We need you to go out there. Attend worship. See what he's preaching about. Give people communion. They're hungry for it. Because Sims can't do it; he's just a lay pastor. And he's been refusing to go through our training. See if you can find out if he's secretly baptizing people, or giving communion on the sly. Let us know what you find out."

So the Reverend McCall went one Sunday morning. The worship service *was* unrecognizable to him. The man *was* different, complete with fire and brimstone and a heavy dose of scripture. His prayers were extemporaneous, from the heart, but far from eloquent. There was an actual altar call, demanding acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. People actually had to come forward, and say it out loud in front of everybody. Out loud.

Sims made no excuses, but he firmly refused to budge. No, he was not going through the training they expected. He was not going to be mentored, let alone supervised! No, he was not going to be examined by the commission. No.

So this morning the Reverend McCall waited for the elders and the commission to assemble as he gave his report. Mr. Sims sat there, stony faced.

McCall said what he had to say. Sims was, as you might expect, defensive. The Reverend was brief and to the point. But then something happened that completely threw McCall for a loop. Sims suddenly *denied* he had refused to cooperate. Sims said he *would* go through the training. He would be supervised. Said he WOULD be mentored! The Reverend McCall riffled through his folder and pulled out a piece of paper. It was an e-mail dated some months prior. In it Sims had lined out his refusal of further training. McCall caught Mr. Sims in a flat out lie in front of everyone. Sims was silenced.

We never really knew what happened to that congregation, or to Mr. Sims. I don't even think anybody ever even checked up on the people again. Last heard, Sims and his wife had moved out of state. The larger church owned the land and the building. It wasn't worth much, not much at all.

We wondered if we could even sell the place. Way out there in the boonies.

There was the stuff McCall hadn't mentioned. Details the commission wasn't interested in. Whenever he went out there, that little clutch of people greeted him warmly. Even though they didn't know him their eyes lit up. He needn't have worried about finding a place to eat. Every single time he went out there they fed him. Well, too, with a really nice potluck. It was good food, set to impress.

There was a sense of communion about it, there on those rickety folding tables with the blue and yellow plaid tablecloths. There was a sharing and a bounty that could hardly be folded into an order of worship. It was there. On a folding table sagging with homemade pimento cheese, pineapple upside down cake and hand picked berries.

There was Mr. Sims himself. He was a tall, slender man with a mild manner. He sort of faded into the woodwork--that is, until he started to preach the Word. Then he came alive, even if it *was* fire and brimstone. At least you knew where he stood! You knew where he was coming from. You could tell he wasn't in it for his ego. Not with a couple of dozen people to preach to, and that was on Easter Sunday. He certainly wasn't in it for money, because there wasn't any. He had gotten his whole family involved. Mrs. Sims played the electric organ, and their grown daughter sang once in a while. It was a little schmaltzy, but you know, everybody pulled out the old red hymnal and everybody sang.

You could tell Sims liked the people, and they liked him back. Oh, he had ruffled some feathers, especially the old timers, people who remembered the days when they had a "real" preacher, a preacher who wore a black robe. That preacher wore spectacles in the pulpit. It made him look smart. He tended to look down at his notes a lot. That last preacher was a lot quieter preacher than Sims. He did things by the book. Maybe too much by the book. People seemed to have forgotten it was under his watch that the church nearly died.

Sims *had* confided in McCall. He *had* baptized, against the rules. Ten people. Eight adults. Many came to the Lord during his 18 months there. This group of worn out factory workers had adopted a family who came from New Orleans, after the hurricane. Now they were looking for someone to donate a car, so the mom could get to work at the canning plant in the next town.

When they first got there, he and Mrs. Sims led the charge to fix up the old church, make it more presentable. They came in their work clothes. It took a lot of Saturdays. They repaired and painted. They cleaned and shined. Most days they were there, three people helped them.

And there was stuff McCall didn't even know about. He was pretty sure about that.

Come to think of it, Sims baptized ten people. They helped a whole family of four for months. Out of those ten people, you can bet they touched about 40 more, so that makes 54. How many people did Sims visit in the hospital? How many wrinkled hands did he hold? How many brows did he soothe? How many times did

they share the communion of the pot luck table with people who did not have a table?

It kind of makes you think. It kind of makes you wonder. I never knew what happened to Mr. and Mrs. Sims, but I'd be willing to bet they are out there, doin' the same thing in Indiana they did in Arkansas, bringing people to the Lord, maybe not by the book, but by love.