



# SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## Sermon for Sunday, September 2, 2018

*Proper 17*

FR. ALAN GIBSON

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9 | Psalm 15 | James 1:17-27 | Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I don't think I've shared this with you before, but you might have guessed: Even with a weekend packed with sales, I hate shopping. My snazzy wardrobe may have tipped you off. Summers it's either black or khaki pants. Winters it's a black or gray sweater. One of the consolations of my job is that I don't have to struggle with fashion in the way most working people do. I like it that way. But even people in my line of work run the risk of becoming victims of fashion, as everyone does, in dealing with attitudes and opinions that are popular, or permissible, or expected. Do we subscribe to a herd mentality because others do? Or do we dare be unfashionable, different, because that's who we truly are?

Time does funny things to our memories, just as it does to fashion. For much of the world today, the teachings of Jesus are simply out of style, but in first-century Palestine they were dangerously fresh. Over the past four weeks we have heard how Jesus lost many followers by proclaiming that his death would lead to life for all who took his flesh and blood as food. Access to God is to be found in a man who claims to be God's son, who would sacrifice himself for us.

This did not sit well with the religious leaders Jesus encountered. Their power rested in their ability to interpret and enshrine religious tradition. Compliance with the rules of this tradition, so they taught, made one right with God. Any challenge to the system was a threat to those who controlled it. So, practical rules, such as: after a day's work, hands should be washed before eating; had been turned into a burdensome ritual that dictated how the water was to be poured, the position the hands are to be in as the water is poured, which hand gets soaped first, and the method and order in which fingernails are to be addressed. A sensible command to wash up before supper in a society of farmers and herders had been hijacked by the fashions of religion. We may find it silly, now, but in Jesus' day such behavior was a sign of being 'in' or 'out', religiously speaking.

Jesus didn't have a problem with rules or tradition or religion. What he does have a problem with is when rules

and traditions and religion become a substitute for the living God. The Pharisees, as keepers and interpreters of the Law, set the fashion. They decided who was holy, and, who was not. Considering that nearly two-thirds of the Laws in the Torah have something to do with food, the power the Pharisees held within their society was enormous. Even the most stylish thin individual had to eat, sometime. If all your time is spent worrying about what you are going to put in your mouth and how to correctly get it there, it doesn't leave much time to be concerned with what's going on in your heart. Religion became an exercise in checking off the boxes.

Jesus comes along, throws out the boxes, and substitutes himself. A relationship replaced the rule book. What you put in your mouth is not what's going to hurt you, Jesus says. It's the evil that can come out of the heart that causes harm to you, and to the people around you. That is what will separate you from God, not the condition of your fingernails.

The Pharisees taught ritual purity: that the proper washing of hands, before eating the proper foods, with the proper people, off the proper plates, with the proper utensils, at the proper time of day, and then properly disposing of the leftovers – would, somehow, make God happy.

Jesus turns this around and asks: what about the people who don't have enough to eat? Or, what about the people we wouldn't be caught dead eating with? Or, what had to be done to get those plates and utensils, and all the other fashionable trappings of our existence? Or, what opportunity was missed to share a meal with someone who cares for you because you were too busy to take the time? Or, what is being done to the earth by consuming more than we need, or wasting precious resources, simply because we can?

In a society filled with uncertainty and rapid change, some arbiters of societal fashion, values and thought will tell us that we can, with a good conscience, live in a world that tolerates hunger, as long as we have more than enough to eat. That we can live in a world with multiple boundaries based on all sorts of arbitrary differences, as long as we have more than sufficient might to enforce those boundaries.

That we can live in a world where a few have access to all the benefits of life, while many struggle to stay alive.

Then there is the ever un-fashionable Jesus who says, "These evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

So, we have a choice. We can surrender to fashion, or we can heed Jesus' warning. One way will eventually turn us into victims. The other, will make us children of God. One way will give us a world where it is easy to blend into a dull, desensitized herd. The other will be highly un-fashionable, but it will look a lot like heaven.