

## Have You Seen My Tiger?

[Text - Mark 7:1-15; 21]

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It can be entertaining to read some of the peculiar laws that various communities have on the books. In my hometown of Canton, there's a law that people who lose their pet tiger are allowed one hour before notifying the authorities. I guess that's to give the owner time to put out a big saucer of milk and yell "Here Kitty, Kitty! Kitty" In Youngstown, there's a specific law that prohibits giving a passenger a ride on the roof of your taxi - yet nothing about tossing them in the trunk. The city of Akron bans the posting of any signs at swimming pools. [Though you'd think they'd make an exception for posting a sign that says "Post No Signs!"] And in Nicholas County, West Virginia, there is a law that prohibits members of the clergy from telling humorous stories from the pulpit. Of course, in Brecksville that law's not necessary, since the clergy here apparently aren't that humorous!

In First Century Israel, there's a strange and strict law that prohibits people from eating with "defiled hands." This doesn't mean "dirty hands," in terms of hygiene. Your hands can be completely spotless, yet still considered to be "defiled." Simply washing them isn't good enough; there is also a specific, detailed *ritual* that has to be completed for your hands to be considered "purified." Get that ritual right, and you're ready to eat; get it wrong, and you better be ready for some serious condemnation, from some really serious religious critics.

That's what happens in this morning's New Testament reading. Some Scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem notice that Jesus' disciples fail to "purify" their hands before eating. So these religious leaders attack Jesus for not being a good rabbi - for not teaching his disciples to observe all the complex rules and traditions that had become so crucial for controlling their followers. But Jesus fires right back at them: "You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you, saying, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.'...For you abandon the commandment of God, and hold to human

tradition.” Then Jesus - good rabbi that he is - gives them a specific example of this hypocrisy.

As handed down by Moses, the Fourth Commandment of God Almighty is “Honor your father and mother!” This certainly includes helping care for one’s parents in their later years. Yet that responsibility is neatly swept-away by a religious *tradition* of pledging one’s financial support to the Temple in Jerusalem. It’s called *Corban* - a kind of shady First Century investment loophole - a shrewd way of supposedly honoring ones Heavenly Parent, while treating one’s aging earthly parents in a cold and uncaring manner. But Jesus will have none of this. Time and time again, he teaches *and* demonstrates that people cannot honestly pledge their love and devotion to an unseen God, if they’re not willing to show their love and compassion to the people of God who are right there among them. If we truly love our Divine Creator, then we will be compelled to care for all the people around us who are created in that Divine Image - especially those vulnerable people who need our help the most.

I’m not sure what the opposite of religious *legalism* is, but I think it’s probably Divine *Grace*. Religious legalism points-out and picks-at what’s wrong with other people; while Divine Grace encourages and raises-up the good in others. Legalism constricts our lives, because it can make us so afraid of doing something *wrong*, that we end up doing nothing at all. Divine Grace, on the other hand, opens-up and energizes our lives - because knowing that there is a gracious allowance for our mistakes, frees us to act boldly and compassionately. Legalism is about following strict rules, while grace is about forming sincere relationships. And religious legalism isn’t just a way to try to control other people; it’s a devious way to claim to speak directly for God, and thereby essentially to *control* God! Divine Grace, however, is the unbounded Power of God moving *us* to graciously care for the people around us.

In the person of Jesus Christ, you and I are given a perfect example of a life that overflows with Divine Grace. He consistently challenges those picky, legalistic rules and regulations that have corrupted his

faith tradition. He cuts right through them, and reveals the true core of his faith: that God is Love! And if we really want to know and serve God, then we must love and serve one another. To *do* this, we may have to put-aside many of our long-held religious traditions and practices. We will need to meet people where *they* are in their life and faith journeys. And we will need to surrender our self-righteous impulse to judge others; and find gracious and compassionate ways to help build them up, and to enhance their lives.

The Good News that Jesus Christ proclaims *and* demonstrates, is that the Holy One's primary desire for us is that we treat one another in ways that are kind and fair, gracious and loving. This is why Jesus is willing to "work" on the Sabbath - to break the rules, and to bring healing to those who are hurting and broken. This is why he boldly touches the "untouchable" lepers and warmly embraces society's "outcasts" - ignoring human *laws*, in order to uplift human *lives*. And I think this is why Jesus invites you and me to worry less about religious rules and traditions - so that we can concentrate more on cultivating wholesome and authentic relationships with the people around us.

It is extremely easy to find strange, harsh, and even cruel laws, scattered throughout the Sacred Scriptures. The greater challenge - and the greatest treasure - is to look beyond the Letter of the Law, and to discover the gracious, Living Word of Jesus Christ:

The One who welcomes all people with open arms and an open heart.  
The One who routinely breaks the rules, in order to help and heal the people.

The One who calls you and me to faithfully follow that Divine Path of compassion, forgiveness, and grace.

And as far as I know, there's no *law* against doing that!