

Principles, Particulars and Preferences

Mark 7:1-23 (shortest version)

Over the years, this mythical story poking fun at denominationalism has played out in a variety of ways and places. I've heard various versions of this story. A guy was walking along on a hill near the edge of a cliff enjoying scenery that could not help but make you think of God. He suddenly slipped over the edge. As he was holding on for dear life he screamed for help. Another guy heard the screams and ran to assist. After huffing and puffing and pulling, the rescuer pulled the helpless fellow back to safety.

"Thanks be to God for your help," said the rescued person.

"Oh, are you a Christian?"

"Yes, I'm a Baptist"

"Oh, so am I!" said the rescuer. "Are you Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?"

"Northern Baptist."

"How about that! Me too. Reformed or Orthodox?"

"Reformed."

The rescuer exclaimed - "Glory to God! So am I. Are you Reformed Northern Baptist of 1840 or Reformed Northern Baptist of 1855?"

"1840!" responded the rescued person.

The rescuer's face turned beet red, the veins in his neck bulged, and he screamed, "Heretic!" He rushed over, grabbed the fellow and threw him off the cliff.

We can all chuckle because we've seen similar tendencies in ourselves and our own churches.

Imagine though, if instead of it being a joke, you lived in a country where the Reformed Northern Baptist Church of 1855 was the official state religion and the offended fellow in the above story worked for the government. Then imagine trying to start a business, appeal a tax ruling, get a professional license or win a civil case if you thought the 1840 movement was correct. This scenario was not unusual in Europe's Reformation history.

Now imagine that the church had the power of the state to come after you and try to get you to stop sharing your faith, to convert back to the state religion. Probably during this time of trying to change you, you were being tortured. Even if you did renounce your faith, they still might drown you, burn you, and find some way to kill you.

This happened during the Reformation and it wasn't just Catholics who killed the early Anabaptists. Lutherans and others did also. So it's not an accident that some of the wars in Europe in the last 500 years have revolved around religious differences to various degrees.

So our scripture from Mark is important. The Pharisees and some religious teachers of that day asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders, instead of eating their food with unclean hands?" When you think about it - that's actually not a bad question Jesus. "Why don't your disciples wash their hands before eating? Their hands are unclean from being in the market place." But the question wasn't really about hand washing.

So Jesus responded to the real question. Sometimes in our conversations there is the verbal question – but the unspoken question is the real one. At times, when I ask my wife a question, I get the answer she wants me to have, or the one she thinks I'm asking. Ever happen to you? At times I respond in the same way. I guess what's behind her question. This habit can make communication easier or more difficult – depending on the purpose of the question and what the respondent is trying to avoid.

So Jesus began castigating the Pharisees and some teachers of the law, the religious leaders of that day, about their rigid mind set and some of their traditional rules. Jesus was not politically correct. He wasn't kind. He wasn't nice. He didn't play along to get along. Instead, Jesus didn't deal with the verbal question, but went straight to the underlying question, which was – “Who do you think you are, challenging our rules, our theology and our positions?”

We need to remember that these stories in the gospels, often are part of an ongoing bigger story, a broader relationship, and continuing interactions. We will look at these verses in more detail next week, but for now let's consider what often happens, with us humans.

In your bulletin outline are three circles. **Principles** are the core beliefs about God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. When we deny these things we cannot be called Christian. Principles are not determined by tradition or culture. Examples would include the fact of sin – personal & collective, the trinity, and God's desire to be worshiped. An absolute is Jesus invites us to respond to his love and help others discover his love. These are timeless truths.

The next biggest circle is **Particulars**. It's a bigger group of values. **Particulars** are those things we believe and practice in the church based on our interpretation of scripture. Particulars are traditions that come from our own unique history. They are not needed for salvation. The method of baptism is an example. Lifting out the Sermon on the Mount as the Bible within the Bible is another.

For example, some churches had the concept of the bench on the platform and other churches have the three thrones, representing the trinity. We have neither, so we must be really different. But God's not going to judge churches based on their furniture. One could say particulars tend to be denominational distinctives.

For example, when I say someone is a Southern Baptist – what immediately comes to mind? Or they are a Pentecostal church? What about Catholic? When we say that person comes from a Scottish Reformed background, we know they aren't like us. And when we say someone is a Mennonite – we have built in expectations.

The third circle, the biggest is **Preferences**. All of us have personal preferences. It's the stuff we grew up with. It's what we are used to doing. It's our likes & dislikes. Hair style, organizational style, jewelry, church decorations, and music are examples of preferences. Denominations, conferences and churches have preferences. Each have their own history, culture, style, & theology

It would be an interesting exercise for each of us to fill in these circles with our own view of what's a Principle, a Particular and a Preference. And then for us to share those and then talk about and maybe – agree on some, agree to disagree on other issues and

/ or choose to stick together despite our differences? Could we come to agreement on what North Star's Principles, Particulars and Preferences are?

This might be easier than we think and it could also be much harder. But often church conflicts develop out of conflict between what different people fit into these three circles. So they need to take the time to discern as individuals and as a group what they put into each circle.

In the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders – it was a difference of opinion between the 3 P's. They had different ideas of what values and habits and ideas had more or less priority. Jesus was aiming back at foundational concerns, and the religious leaders had developed a whole system to enhance ritual purity.

What happens is that over time, our Preferences tend to get elevated to the level of Particulars. And Particulars get elevated to Principles. When this occurs, it's often a case of good values gone bad. Like with the Jewish religious leaders. And just like us.

In one congregation I was in, people loved to tell this story of change. The congregation was against any kind of instruments. That was an absolute principle. But after they built a brand new modern sanctuary, fellowship hall, education facility, and offices, they arrived for the first service and there was a grand piano right up front. This caused great consternation. Feelings ranged from absolute delight to great anger. But it didn't take long for the piano to be accepted by the great majority of the congregation. Today you could not take out the piano without a fight. It's now a Particular and for many – a Principle.

What caused this change to be accepted? The contractor for the building, who was not a member – donated the piano. And Mennonites, as frugal as we are, loved the surprise. But it was also in cultural time frame where pianos were being accepted by many congregations. But not keyboards, guitars and drums. This experience makes me wonder why we fight so hard over some issues. Taking a historical perspective can help us to be humble. And often, other factors are part of the story, like getting a surprise reimbursement from the contractor!

I encourage you and your list making to name some things that are Principles, Particulars and Preferences for you. Some are obvious like head coverings, wedding rings, zippers, music, and methods of baptism. Today issues would include how open and affirming should we be around sexual habits, how we use our Sabbaths, Bible knowledge, justice issues and so on. This tension between the 3 P's really never changes. But as we change, as technology and society changes, the focus of our life & witness together at times need adjusting.

A closing story. I was in a church where the previous much loved long term minister had preached against divorce & remarriage. Until he married his son who had divorced and asked dad to marry him. Neither the son or his bride attended the congregation because they didn't live nearby. So, on the one hand it wasn't a church issue. On the other it was, because the minister and many people were against divorce and remarriage. And their building, fellowship hall and sanctuary was used for the wedding.

This wasn't a reason for that minister leaving the congregation, but it left a burr under the saddle of many people, an irritation – even those who were not opposed to

divorce and remarriage. Their Principles, Particulars, and Preferences had been touched, challenged, and they almost had to face a difficult issue. The issue was an irritant but just having the issue come up, was part of the irritation.

After the congregational conflict was ended, and some healing took place, I was asked to write a policy for the church about divorce and remarriage. I refused. I said, I was more than happy to help the whole congregation process this matter, to have a conversation, to provide resources, but it was the congregation's job to write a policy. This would be fair for their next pastor. I think with Principles, Particulars and Preferences, it's important for congregations to do the work. I think it would help decrease church fights. The Holy Spirit and scripture would be brought into the loop, instead of just tradition. And the church community would become stronger. It would strengthen community as the centre of our life.

I think if we spend time occasionally reflecting personally and together on our Principles, Particulars and Preferences, it would help us be both more faithful and more responsive to what God is doing with us in our midst and around us. This exercise from time to time will help us lay healthy groundwork for the next 500 years. Congregations need to do the work to set their own boundaries. More to come, next week.

Principles, Particulars and Preferences

Mark 7:1-23 (middle size version)

Over the last 500 years, this mythical story has played out in a variety of ways and places. There is an old joke poking fun at denominationalism. That's the idea that my denomination is right and since you and I have some doctrinal and other differences, you are completely wrong. I've heard various versions of this so here goes.

A guy was walking along on a hill near the edge of a cliff enjoying scenery that could not help but make you think of God. He slipped over the edge. As he was holding on for dear life he screamed for help. Another guy heard the screams and ran to assist. After huffing & puffing & pulling, the rescuer pulled the helpless fellow back to safety.

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So our scripture from Mark is important. The Pharisees and some religious teachers of that day asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders, instead of eating their food with unclean hands?"

When you think about it – that’s actually not a bad question. We spend a lot of time today teaching children and reminding people to wash their hands, especially before eating. In some families it’s a rule – including after grocery shopping. Most restaurants have signs in their bathrooms, especially reminding employees to wash their hands. And here at church, every bathroom doesn’t just have a reminder, it has several sets of the same four part instruction on how to wash and dry hands. We do this as one way to try to stay healthy as well as not pass on germs to each other.

So it’s a good question, Jesus. “Why don’t your disciples wash their hands before eating? Their hands are unclean from being in the market place.”

But Jesus responded to the real question. Some times in our conversations there is the verbal question – but the unspoken question is the real one. At times, when I ask my wife a question, I get the answer she wants me to have, or the one she thinks I’m asking. Ever happen to you? At times I respond in the same way. I guess what’s behind her question. This habit can make communication easier or more difficult – depending on the purpose of the question and what the respondent is trying to avoid.

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In your bulletin outline are three circles. **Principles** are the core beliefs about God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. When we deny these things we cannot be called Christian. Principles are not determined by tradition or culture.

Examples are the trinity, the fact of sin – personal and collective, plus God’s desire to be worshiped. An absolute is Jesus invites us to respond to his love and help others discover his love. These are timeless truths. It would be an interesting conversation for us to pool our lists of what each one of us would consider a core principle, absolute value for following Jesus.

The next biggest circle is Particulars. It’s a bigger group of values. **Particulars** are those things we believe and practice in the church based on our interpretation of scripture. Particulars are traditions that come from our own unique history. They are not needed for salvation. The method of baptism is an example. Lifting out the Sermon on the Mount as the Bible within the Bible is another.

For example, some churches had the concept of the bench on the platform and other churches have the three thrones, representing the trinity. We have neither, so we must be really different. But God’s not going to judge churches based on their furniture. One could say particulars tend to be denominational distinctives.

For example, when I say someone is a Southern Baptist – what immediately comes to mind? Or they are a Pentecostal church? What about Catholic? When we say that person comes from a Scottish Reformed background, we know they aren't like us. And when we say someone is a Mennonite – we have built in expectations. Which often causes us to play the Mennonite game – trying to figure out who they really are, and not just who they are related to.

The third circle, the biggest is **Preferences**. All of us have personal preferences. It's the stuff we grew up with. It's what we are used to doing. It's our likes and dislikes. Hair style, jewelry, church decorations, and music are examples of preferences. Denominations, conferences and churches have preferences. Each have their own history, culture, style, and theology.

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This might be easier than we think and it could also be much harder. But often church conflicts develop out of conflict between what different people fit into these three circles. So they need to take the time to discern individual and as a group what they put into each circle.

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I'm going to leave it to you and your list making to name some things including theological Principles, Particulars and Preferences. Some are obvious like head coverings, wedding rings, zippers, music, and method of baptism, as well as divorce and remarriage. Today issues would include how open & affirming should we be around sexual habits, how we use our Sabbaths, Bible knowledge, justice issues and so on. This tension between the 3 P's really never

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