

Text: Mark 7:1-23

I always enjoy sharing the story of the ashram cat written by Anthony DeMello. He writes:

When the guru sat down to worship each evening, the ashram cat would get in the way and distract the worshippers. So he ordered that the cat be tied during evening worship.

After the guru died the cat continued to be tied during evening worship. And when the cat died, another cat was brought to the ashram so that it could be duly tied during evening worship.

Centuries later learned treatises were written by the guru's disciples on the religious and liturgical significance of tying up a cat while worship is performed.

We Americans, and certainly we Episcopalians, have our own ashram cats. And those cats sure are distracting and can keep us from our deeper purposes, not only in worship, but in life.

In our Gospel story in Mark today, Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah and describes the way God looks into our hearts and then sees the many ways people become distracted by appearances or human traditions that fall short of connecting us to what really matters. In this case, the religious leaders were criticizing Jesus and his followers for failing to follow a tradition of ritually washing their hands before eating – so they were eating with what is termed, “defiled hands.” This was related to the kosher laws. But Jesus challenges them right back and quotes Isaiah saying, “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me...You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.” In other words, their focus was all wrong – in focusing on human traditions and looking only on the outward appearance of things they had failed to actually honor God, because it is what is in our hearts that matters to God. Like the ashram cat, the focus had gone off base somewhere and the meaning and purpose had been lost. And just like the people in both of these stories, we too often mistake the appearance of things for the meaning itself– we get distracted and lose our focus on what really

matters. I know I’m guilty of that at times. It's easy to get distracted

This past Easter season Fr. Mark and I realized we disagreed about the timing of when the Paschal candle should be put away. I made the case that it was to stay out through Pentecost while he felt it should be put away by the end of Eastertide. I won the argument (in case you’re wondering). But, at one point it occurred to me just how unimportant this was – and I know we both agree on one thing: Jesus didn’t care how long we left that candle out. And while that argument was good natured, I admit, I've gotten thoroughly distracted plenty of times by liturgical and even theological arguments that ultimately made no difference to anyone or anything.

Ashram cats surround us and distractions abound as we over-focus on the outward appearance of things. I started wondering this week just how much we Americans spend on our actual physical appearance. It turns out that, on average, each of us spends nearly a quarter of a million dollars on grooming and beauty products in our lifetimes – that’s over \$300 month on average. And what about time? There’s a fascinating study called the “American Time Use Survey” that was conducted in 2014. It studied the time habits of Americans in a variety of activities. They learned that Americans spend an average of 45 to 55 minutes (roughly an hour) on grooming every day. Of course, that doesn’t take into account time at a gym or working on our homes or cars or other things that maintain appearances to the outside world. But it’s still a really significant amount of time every day. Americans also spend an average of 4 to 6 hours per day on leisure activities. But guess how much time the average American spends on spiritual or religious related activities like prayer? The researchers found that it was about 2 to 15 minutes a day. That’s quite a contrast and does seem to underscore Jesus’ point a bit.

Distractions abound. I was recently invited to try a new skincare line and the more I read about skincare “concerns” the more over the top it began to sound: we women (and maybe some men too) are entirely familiar with the skincare scrutiny that

ranges from issues with wrinkles and skin tone to blemishes and discoloration to firmness... all the way to mapping the size of our pores. It's crazy. And we spend so much money on surgeries and products in America that promise to make us look great even though it's a losing battle: we're going to age and eventually die. It's certainly okay to try and look our best, but the ultimate legacy we leave will have nothing to do with these things and I think we know it deep down.

And yet we are bombarded with images everyday of what we should be and what we should look like to the outside world. Our culture, our current "human tradition" tells us that we need to be thin, attractive, strong, make good money, drive nice cars, have big homes, own the right tech gadgets, smell good, wear the right clothes with colors that match our skin tone, we should have straight white teeth, lots of shiny thick hair, and flawless skin. We should be married to a good looking spouse and have 2.5 kids and not have any real deficits physically or mentally. We should also always look youthful. And so when we fall short of these expectations, because we all do, we can feel less than and even our sense of value and purpose in life can be diminished. But this is not the way Jesus or the Scriptures invite us to see ourselves or our lives. Scripture invites us to let go of these obsessions so we can focus on having a heart that is pure and filled with love for God and others: for living a life that is more than going through the motions. And it all begs the question – what if we spent more time on what really mattered- cultivating our hearts and lives to be in accord with God's will for us and the world and less time worrying about what others thought about us, thereby freeing up so much time and energy for the more important things?

One of the problems with an over-focus on outward appearances is that we may fail to notice the more important aspects of our own characters – the truly beautiful things about ourselves that God has blessed us with in terms of our inner gifts and qualities that shine the light of Christ far more than anything else we do. Could it be that in our desperate focus to be perceived as attractive or successful or just looking like we have

it altogether to the outside world that we have not even noticed or forgotten to utilize the deeper gifts we have to offer the world?

We can also take this over-focus on appearances and misapply it to the way we see and deal with others. What about those times when we are so focused on the outward appearance of others and their lives that we fail to see who they really are? Then we don't even recognize the beauty and gifts that lie within them.

There is an old Chinese saying: "You can't measure the sea with a pot." It's similar to "Don't judge a book by its cover." We can't and shouldn't do that to ourselves or to others. Instead, we can return to the more pressing question that Jesus is asking us to consider: what is in my heart? What is in your heart? In Jewish tradition, the heart is viewed as the seat of the will, not just the place of emotions. It's so important that our hearts be aligned with God's will and purpose. And we can choose and will our hearts and lives to be in accord with God's will: it starts with the simple act of setting aside some time to ask God for that grace. Then we can stop focusing on our ashram cats and start living in the knowledge that when our hearts shine with love and integrity, we are beautiful and successful in God's eyes and our lives have ultimate meaning and purpose, no matter how far afield we may be from cultural expectations and those many "human traditions" that dictate far too many lives. And in so doing, we will find that we are honoring God and keeping God's commandments: living a life worth living.

Amen.