Last Sunday, we concluded a long series of gospel lessons focused on bread.
This week, we are in an argument about table manners.
But this is not about Emily Post – and those of you of a certain age will know who she was.
So, let’s set the scene:
Jesus and his followers are camping along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. They have been there for several days, and it is hot, and they are tired.
Jesus and his followers have been feeding people – thousands, really. And as he shares bread, he teaches people how to pray and how to listen, and how feel the presence of God all around them, and within themselves.
Many in the crowd are sick or wounded in mind, body and spirit. His very touch heals them.
Jesus tells people over and over: You are loved by God, you are adored by God – you are the very beloved of God like no one else in the universe. Yes, even you.
The crowds have never heard or experienced anything like this.
Jesus does not sound like the pious religious authorities from far away Jerusalem who govern every detail of their daily lives.
And, so of course, this gets the attention of the pious religious authorities from far away Jerusalem.
As the story unfolds in the Gospel of Mark this morning, the religious authorities come to interrogate Jesus.
It doesn’t say so exactly in the Gospel of Mark, but it sounds as if Jesus does what he always does: He invites his interrogators to dinner.
He always does that – invites everyone to dinner, and he doesn’t check for membership cards at the door.
And somehow there is always enough food.
But the religious authorities aren’t interested in the food. They are interested in the ritual at the meal – in the rubrics.
They notice immediately that Jesus’ followers are not following the custom of washing their hands before eating.
But this is not the same as your mom telling you to wash your hands before you come to the table.
This is not about hygiene. They know nothing of modern hygiene. It’s about following a very specific code for maintaining holiness and purity, a concept that is probably foreign to most of us.

And this is no small thing.
One way you could hear this is as a power play, with the religious hierarchy asserting their authority.
We know well in the Episcopal Church how liturgy can become the tool of those seeking to maintain power and position. All that is true.
But there are other ways to hear this.
As my friends who are rabbis point out, following the holiness and purity code – keeping kosher – is more than about legalistically following rules.
It is about reminding ourselves of God’s presence at each step of the day, pausing to give thanks for the gift of life. Keeping this rule of life reminds us of who we are: God’s beloved.
And there is something else going on in this code that we as Christians may not fully appreciate: Throughout the history of Judaism, the purity code has been a tool for survival.
In the time of Jesus, the Romans could, at any moment, violently obliterate the Jews, and nearly did.
Keeping to the purity rules was a form of resistance in the time of the Romans. This remained true for Jewish people over the next 2,000 years during pogroms and persecutions at the hands of Christians and the Holocaust perpetrated by Nazis.
So, when the religious authorities confront Jesus they are worried that everything will unravel if the purity code is not followed. Survival is at stake.
But Jesus turns this around and asks his interrogators if they understand the deepest purpose of the purity rules. He is not against rituals, but asks: Are you following these rules for their own sake, or does this lead you to the divine presence within you?
Our attitudes matter. How we cultivate our minds and our souls matter.
Are you choking on fear, greed, bigotry, tribalism and resentment? Or are you feasting on faith, hope and love?
Out attitudes matter.
And Jesus goes another step: He challenges institutions that have lost sight of their purpose.
Do we do things only because we’ve always done them this way? Are we just going through the motions?
Have our religious practices become so ritualistic we’ve forgotten their purpose?
Does our worship make us insular and self-centered, or give us a deeper sense of our connectedness to all of God’s creation?
These are crucial questions for us, especially in a church that is so steeped in tradition.
Our rituals, our prayers, our liturgy have purpose and meaning when they lead us to a closer sense of God’s presence and God’s love for us.
And our ceremonies and rituals have purpose when they challenge us to bring faith, hope and love outside ourselves to the rest of the world.
What would Jesus have us do? Feed people. Feed their bodies and feed their souls.
Jesus doesn’t check membership cards at the door, and neither do we.
Jesus’s words can sound harsh – make no mistake. This is not the cuddly Jesus, the Good Shepherd.
He tells of the evils that human beings create: greed, theft, adultery, envy, violence, vengeance, murder – and he pointedly mentions that all of that comes from the muck inside us.
But before we despair, I would also point you to the Letter of James we hear this morning.
The name James is a Greek translation of the Hebrew name Jacob, and this Jacob was likely the older brother of Jesus.
Yes, Jesus indeed had at least one brother, and this brother was known for his wisdom and common sense.
In the letter, James – or Jacob – writes of how the gifts inside us “coming down from the Father of Lights” – gifts from above, he calls them – are truly at the heart of living in faith.
He tells us we cannot discover these gifts from a place of anger, resentment and fear.
“You must understand this, my beloved,” James writes. “Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.”
His letter will unfold for us the next five Sundays, and we only hear it every three years, so please listen closely to his words.
James tells us how to cultivate these spiritual gifts. Care for the sick, the poor, the lonely and the people on the margins. “Be doers of the word,” he writes.
And when you so, you will be this close to the Kingdom of God.
We know how to do this here in this Cathedral. We have a long legacy for caring for people in body, mind and spirit.
Let us renew this task by caring for each other, and caring for the world around us.

Let us be slow to anger, and not just with strangers, but with our families, our friends, our co-workers – and each other here.

We won’t always get it right, and we will fall short. But know this always:

God’s holiness is truly within each us. We are hands and feet of God’s love in this world, for as James puts it, those who are “doers who act – they will be blessed in their doing.”

That is the true religion.

AMEN