Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lorrd Jesus Christ. Amen.

Think about a plumb line. The plumb line is mentioned several times in the Old Testament and is familiar to builders and was used as a tool as a tool for ancient builders, to ensure that buildings were constructed correctly and everything aligned properly, otherwise there would be problems. (House appraiser) Today, we use the wonderful invention, the level, where we check to make sure the air bubble is between two lines (you do not want to be left of plumb, or right) meaning it is plumb or the newer invention of a laser that creates a straight line. However, the plumb line is also used as a metaphor in the Bible to represent what God expects from his people and their spiritual alignment with his word. To be plumb is to be in a right relationship with God. Which should be everyone’s goal. One of the most well-known references to the plumb line in the Bible is found in the book of Amos. In Amos 7:7-8, God gives the prophet Amos a vision of a plumb line. He tells Amos that he is setting a plumb line among his people to see if they measure up to God’s standards. If they do not, he will no longer overlook their sins and will judge them accordingly. That is the law. The law condemns.

Today’s reading from Deuteronomy presents the traditional Jewish belief that God has given the law which is to be obeyed faithfully. The authority behind the law is God’s covenant and is gracious in hearing the cries of the people – Moses, acting at the behest of God says let my people go and eventually the Pharoah complied. In this series of instructions from Moses over time in Deuteronomy was finalized in the seventh century and encouraged the community to remain faithful to Torah law, despite the attractions and threats of Assyrian domination. The theological theme is the covenant relationship: if the people remain faithful, God will bless them, but they do not measure up by keeping the plumb line he would not bless them. As if from the mouth of Moses, chapter 4 presents historical and theological arguments for obeying the commandments, which are then repeated in Deuteronomy 5. “This entire law” includes 613 commands for Jewish males. Good luck following all this to the letter of the law.

These allowed folks to remain steadfast in God’s word in an Assyrian society that had conquered the Israelite and brought them into the society with many pagans and temptations and many gods. Ashur, for example, was the Assyrian national God (there were many others) and had a significant role in Assyrian society in the context of warfare and military support and gave dominion and military prowess to the Assyrian people which they believe helped them defeat the Northern kingdom of Israel. The reverence for Ashur as a deity of war was deeply ingrained in the Assyrian culture, reflecting their militaristic nature and expansionist ambitions and the kings believed they had a divine connection and authority bestowed on them. They believed Ashur directly intervened here on earth and was responsible for them conquering the northern kingdom of Israel. If you were the defeated, do you believe in a god who brought military victory or the monotheistic God who brought you out of slavery only to be defeated later by the Assyrians? We can see the temptation.

You have to appreciate the fact that the people tried to keep the law, to keep within the plumb line. Jesus, however, offers a different perspective. He tells us “This people” that “honors me with their lips” but whose “hearts are far from me.” Some in the religious community have begun focusing on surface matters like hand washing, what one eats and the traditions of the elders) but in the meantime have forgotten the core of their belief. What really matters is how one’s faith is expressed in mercy, in words and actions that build up rather than tear down the neighbor. Following God is not simply following the law, where we all fall short, but more importantly is our love for God which results in loving others. It isn’t really about folks taking the law literally –Judaism maintains traditions of healthy eating habits that were understood as having been promulgated by God but as Mark points out it is between these practices of the Torah and “the commandment of God.” What Jewish dietary laws should the disciples maintain? If Christians are to dismiss traditional Jewish views about evil entering one’s body, then we must tell where evil comes from. Jesus saves the day as he tells us evil comes from within the individual human heart.

At the end of the day, this isn’t really about Christians eating with dirty hands. It is not clear from today’s story which part of the Jewish ethical tradition remains valid for Christians. Instead, it focuses on the fact that the human heart is what causes sin, not other outside sources or influences, which we try to resist. This is about “law” which condemns us – all fall short of the glory of God, but more importantly the gospel while Jesus eats with all the disciples. It is about love in our heart for others and how we lead our lives in Christ.

Our central activity is to gather weekly with our focus on Jesus—in scripture preaching and song as we pray together for others, we remember our baptism in the waters, and the Spirit strengthens us in the real presence of Christ in the bread and wine bread, and wine to keep us in God’s grace. **I am the bread of life** we heard as Jesus uses this metaphor to describe Himself as essential for spiritual sustenance, just as bread is essential for physical nourishment. This is the Jesus, who embodies forgiveness and mercy, and is the heart of all we do. Yes, again and again, life can be out of plumb. But again and again, Jesus centers us. Yes, the law condemns us but Jesus saves us. We aren’t to criticize eating habits but rather focusing on others who deserve dignity and respect from us because they too are God’s children. James tells us to not to talk the talk but walk the walk. Our actions are louder than our words. The most loving thing we can do is to tell others about Jesus who will center their lives forever. Go and do. Tell others to come and see. Amen.