

Fifteenth Weekend After Pentecost (B/RCL): "Handwashing and Soul Cleansing"
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
September 1-2, 2018
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

In 25 years of preaching I've never been interested in saying anything about today's Gospel. Until this week. It's a strange duck. What's the big deal about the disciples washing their hands? 'Makes the Pharisees seem like a mom inspecting a child's grubby hands and announcing, "No dinner for you, young man, until you march off to the sink and scrub those hands!" And all that stuff about the washing of dishes? How relevant could this be to our lives today??

But – this is where the Holy Spirit led me, so let me share with you some of what I've learned ☺. Remember the 6 stone jars at the wedding feast at Cana in Galilee? St. John tells us they were "for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding 20 to 30 gallons." (John 2:6) That means they were filled with water for the guests to wash their hands before the meal and also in between courses. That water was set apart for that one purpose. It couldn't be drawn off for cooking the meal or watering flowers or giving a drink to the donkeys who transported the wedding guests.

The whole ritual act of handwashing was orchestrated. It wasn't to wash off germs, it was to fulfill a perceived religious obligation. Here's how it went: first you needed the pure water set aside for this purpose, contained in a jar with a lid so nothing could fall in and pollute it. Then you needed to be sure there wasn't anything gritty or dirty on your hands that could be brushed off, like gravel or sand. Then you held the hands with fingers pointed up and poured the equivalent of at least an eggshell and a half of water down the fingers at least as far as the wrist. You did that to both hands, then used the wet fist of one

hand to scrub the palm of the other. **Then** you held your hands fingers pointed down and poured more water from the wrist down the fingers. You did this before the meal began and in between courses. This is why they needed between 120 and 180 gallons of water for the guests at the wedding reception in Cana! (I wonder what they did after all that water turned to wine....)

This handwashing was considered so essential that people believed you risked “poverty and destruction,”¹ and would be threatened and attacked by a demon named Shibta, if you skipped it. “Bread eaten with unclean hands was no better than excrement.”² There’s a story about one rabbi who was “excommunicated” and refused a proper burial because he neglected handwashing, and another of a rabbi who was thrown in jail by the Romans and almost died of dehydration. Rather than drink the water his captors gave him he used it to wash his hands.

All of this is why the Pharisees and experts in the Law were scandalized when they saw that Jesus and His crew were not following the prescribed ritual before eating a meal. It’s mentioned elsewhere in the Gospel that Jesus and His friends were also in Dutch because they ate with tax collectors, Gentiles, and other sinners (Mark 2:16). The belief was that if people were “defiled,” ceremonially unclean, they contaminated anyone with whom they came in contact. A Gentile was by definition unclean, as were lepers, women after childbirth, and dead people. Touch any of them and you became unclean, too.

Hmmm, Jesus touched the dead son of the widow of Nain, who was being hauled out of town on a funeral litter. He touched the dead daughter of Jairus, too. His life flowed into them; their death didn’t seep into His bones. The woman with the flow of blood touched the hem of Jesus’ garment; she may as well have grabbed His arm. Jesus touched the leper.

He made them well; they didn't make Him sick, physically or spiritually. The Good Samaritan ministered to the man in the ditch, despite the possibility he was a corpse. He's the one Jesus praised, not the priest and the Levite who skirted the road and passed as far away from the guy as they could. Philip Yancey calls it "reverse contagion." Jesus touches us, poor, unclean, defiled sinners, and His righteousness, His holiness, His salvation, makes us well and whole and pure.

Jesus' real concern in this story isn't washing of hands or dishes. He expresses it in the quote from Isaiah (29:13):

*This people honors me with their lips,
But their hearts are far from me.*

Jesus' concern is that we get our priorities straight. That our religion isn't all show and no substance. That, to quote today's epistle from James (1:22), we are doers and not just hearers of the Word. That we're not straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel. That we're not losing the forest for the trees. That we're not focusing our attention on the wrong things. That the peripheral "stuff" of religious observance isn't consuming all our energy while the heart of it all, loving God above all else and loving our neighbor as ourselves, is taking back seat.

Back to the vessels. There were an incredible number of rules to be followed if a pot or cup or dish became ritually unclean. It made a difference what material the object was made of. For instance, if it were pottery, it could only be made unclean if it **contained** something unclean. So even if pork touched the outside, the vessel was still ok. But if it were made of glass and was hollow, like a glass pitcher, it would be made unclean even by someone unclean holding it; then it had to be destroyed. Metal vessels had to be purged with fire.

So what makes us spiritually unclean? What aspect of our life is less holy than God would like? What in our living is impure? *Defiled* is a harsh word. But Jesus lists the following activities or vices in *The Message* paraphrase of today's Gospel (Mark 7:21-22) as defiling/polluting our souls:

- Obscenities
- Lusts
- Thefts
- Murders
- Adulteries
- Greed
- Depravity
- Deceptive dealings
- Carousing
- Mean looks
- Slander
- Arrogance
- Foolishness

And what's the cure? Only the Holy Spirit can say. Only holy discernment will show us whether "the unclean vessel," so to speak, can be vigorously washed or must be purified by fire or whether it has to be "broken" so it won't break us first. Broken and left beside the road as we go on our Way in a different, life-giving direction. The diaries of pioneer women taking the Santa Fe Trail or any of the other long and treacherous roads to places west of the Rockies always describe the things cast off along the way and left behind, littering the trail. The further they went and the more hazardous travel got, the more they realized how little they really needed. They understood some things had to be offloaded if they were to reach their destination safely. Survival was more important than stuff.

Whatever "dirties our hands" is not an activity worthy of the Kingdom of God. Whatever pollutes our soul is unworthy of a baptized child of God. There is One and One

only who can make us clean and purify our hearts, our words and our deeds. He is ready and waiting for us to ask. Amen

¹William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark* (rev. ed., Daily Study Bible Series, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 165.

²Ibid.

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