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“Look At Your Hands”

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were “unclean”, that is, unwashed.

(The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders.

When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)

So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders

instead of eating their food with ‘unclean’ hands?”

He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: ‘These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’

You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.” ...

Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this.

Nothing outside a man can make him ‘unclean’ by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him ‘unclean’.” ...

“For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.

All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean’.”

I would like to start with a story of a man
finding himself desperately in need of money.
He went to the city zoo,
hoping to get a job feeding the animals.
Although no such opportunity was available,
the manager, seeing the size and the strength of the applicant,
suddenly got an idea.
“You know,” he said, “there are few creatures
who attract attention like a gorilla.
Unfortunately, ours died yesterday.
If we got you a special costume,
would you be willing to imitate him for a few days?”
The hungry man agreed to try.
He was quite successful as he beat his chest
and shook the bars of his cage -
much to the amusement of visitors.
One day, while swinging on his trapeze,
he accidentally lost his grip and landed in the lion’s den.
The huge beast gave a ferocious roar.
Backing away, the impostor realized
he couldn’t cry for assistance
without revealing that he was a fake.
He retreated,
hoping to crawl back over the fence into his own cage.
The lion, however, followed him.
Finally in desperation he yelled, “Help!”

Immediately the lion said in an undertone,
“shut up, stupid! You’ll get us both fired!”
This is not a story from the Hanover Zoo.
But it is a story about the contrast between appearances
and the underlying truth.
So is today’s Gospel story.
Mark records that the disciples were criticized by Pharisees
because they didn’t come to the table
with properly washed hands.
However, the point of dispute was ritual purity, not hygiene.
For his Gentile readers, those as we are,
Mark includes some examples of ritual cleansing laws
that his readers would find ridiculous.
But, they were carefully observed by the Pharisees,
who didn’t think them silly at all.
So what’s the real problem here?
I mean, what’s wrong with wanting to honor tradition?
And today – given what we know about H1N1 flu viruses –
it even seems that hand washing is not such a bad thing?
But the Pharisees washed their hands
for very different reasons that we do today.
It wasn’t about sanitation from germs.
It was a ritual / designed to sanitize
and to separate them from people.
Their tradition was to make sure to wash their hands

when they came home from the market
just in case they happened to brush up against a gentile.

So we have to understand:
this was not a scholarly dispute.
It was a life and death argument.
This group of Pharisees we face in today's Gospel
was an investigating committee,
controlling whether Jesus' teaching
followed their perception of the tradition,
eventually leading to his conviction and death in Jerusalem.

Now we might better understand
why Jesus is not defending his disciples.
He immediately takes the offensive.
He is calling the Pharisees "hypocrites".
He blames them of formalism in their religious observance.
And he accuses them of teaching their own traditions
as if they were commandments of God.

Through the influence of the New Testament Gospels,
the word "Pharisee" has made its way into other languages
even into German.

We call someone a "Pharisäer"
who is mainly concerned with externals,
who judges others harshly
but fails to practice what he preaches.
You all know the beverage of the same name

with the creamy white foam on top of the alcoholic contents;
and the story behind it.

What we can learn from the Pharisees
is that even well-intentioned people can go astray.
What this group from Jerusalem was looking at
were mainly the externals.
They didn't see behind the appearances.
They saw the violation of ritual hand washing codes,
but they didn't take an open look
so that the ministry of Jesus Christ and his disciples
might come before them.
They also didn't really see the people
who had been blessed by this ministry.
They were unfortunately not interested in positive results.
They were more interested in the minute details
that made for separation from the common people.
In this way their eyes were blind to everything
except what threatened their authority and prestige.

A theologian, Jaroslav Pelikan, once wrote:
"Tradition is the living faith of those now dead.
Traditionalism is the dead faith of those still living."
Now this is not meant to knock tradition.
What this is knocking is a blind adherence to traditions
by simply going through the motions without a commitment.
Now, that is something we need to be aware of.

I would like everyone to look at your hands for a moment.
Think for a moment about where those hands have been today.
Are they clean?
How do you know if they are clean or not?
But what is more important:
What have they done today?
Or what are they going to do?
Will they hurt someone, or will they help?
Will you get them dirty and soiled,
because you will wipe a child's faith
or sponge the behind of someone bedridden?
Or will you stash them in your pockets,
where they will stay clean and spotless?
Just so that you know:
God doesn't care if your hands might be covered with germs!
God cares how you are going to use your hands.

The central issue of Jesus' argument towards the Pharisees is
that faith is about commitment.
We therefore do not adhere to a faith
defined by externals and appearances,
but in the vitality of human relationships in God.
That's why Jesus' last commandment was
that we love one another as God loves us.

We cannot use our faith to keep our hands clean,
we cannot use tradition to feel superior, or always right
towards others.

We must not judge and distance ourselves from others
to the exclusion of love.
So don't be afraid to go into the murk and peril of human affairs.
Life is messy,
and God won't hold it against you if you get messy.
After all, God has been getting his hands dirty
in human affairs for millennia -
can we do any less as we try to reach out to others?

When I was growing up
and mother was calling us to the table at dinnertime
it was as sure as fate that she would command,
"Go, wash your hands".
Since germs weren't a big thing to me,
I couldn't see the point of it all.
What was more I was supposed to eat with fork and spoon,
not with my fingers.
So why did they have to be clean?

But you all know how it is with children.
They won't win those arguments,
but not winning doesn't mean giving up the battle.

Sometimes I simply would wash only one side of my hands
and then dutifully show them to her.
But mothers aren't fooled very easily,
and she would ask to see the other side.
Then I would return to my argument,

“I don’t even touch the fork with that side,
so why do I have to wash it?”

Well, there was no way
and eventually I had to come to the table
with complete clean hands.

Regardless of my maneuvering and rationalizing at that time,
the point was really clear:

I didn’t want to wash my hands

because I didn’t want to admit that I was dirty!

And, I think, that is a pretty good picture of grown-ups too.

Scrubbing won’t do it.

We can’t make ourselves clean.

Only God can.

We can wash away the dirt and shape up our lives to look good,
but only God can do the cleaning of the inner self.

Lady Macbeth could wash her hands
but knew that even the great sea couldn’t cleanse the spot,
because the problem was not really with her hands.

Pilate could wash his hands ceremonially but knew as he did it
that it wasn’t his hands that needed to be clean.

And a Pharisee of today might say:

I don’t need to be cleaned.

I don’t need God’s grace, because I can do it myself.

I don’t need to be forgiven,

because there isn’t anything wrong with me.

I don’t need salvation, because I would rather save myself.

To admit this is to admit that I can’t do what I need.

As we got always dirty by living our lives,
using our hands,

committing ourselves to others,

making essential decisions,

and sometimes they are really wide off the mark

we have to be washed every day.

Martin Luther said:

‘Daily / old Adam has to be drowned in me,

that is because I am a sinner.

And prayer for forgiveness is like a daily baptism
through which God blesses with grace.’

As it is with hand washing, it is with our lives.

We are getting dirty with what we are doing

and we are in need of God’s help.

So let’s not be Pharisees.

But let’s be people who know that they depend on God;

let’s be ready to pray for forgiveness;

and let’s not only talk / but be willing to serve.

Let’s not bother with appearances

but assess our commitments

I will leave you with 2 thoughts that I want you to take home.

The first is a question, the second is a truth.

#1 What are you going to do with your hands today?

Will you hide them from others and from God?

Or will you put them to use.

#2 Is the truth...

We are to love others as we love ourselves,

and we are to love God as God loves us, no matter what.

Amen.

Jesus replied that obedience to the so called externals does not make one clean before God. Washing the hands wouldn't do it either. We can't scrub where the problem is. Lady Macbeth could wash her hands but knew that even the great sea couldn't cleanse the spot, because the problem was not really with her hands. Pilate could wash his hands ceremonially but knew as he did it that it wasn't his hands that needed to be clean. Jesus said the uncleanness wasn't from the hands or from that which went into the person as food. It is from the heart and what comes out of it. Our hearts and our motives make things bad, not vice versa.

In any event, Jesus told the Pharisees in today's gospel that laws don't matter, only motives do. When we get to heaven, we will be more pure than Jewish purity law could imagine, more holy than Catholic sacramental law could imagine, more decent than Protestant moral law could imagine. All of that will happen not because we've tried hard enough and been obedient enough, but because our *motives* will finally be right. Our motives will be fixed on God and not ourselves. We will know God face to face. And how do we get from here to there? If our salvation in heaven is being face to face with God, then our interim salvation is to be face to face with each other in the name of God. If we use law to put people in boxes and dismiss their motives, we are not moving in the direction of heaven. Implicit in everything Jesus says, therefore, is this truth: *Christianity is a religion of relationships*. It is not a religion expressed and defined in its laws, but in the vitality of human relationship in God. That's why Jesus' last commandment was that we love one another as he has loved us. The law can show people how to be good, but the law cannot *make* people good. As Paul says, "if a law had been given which could make alive, then righteousness would indeed be by the law." Only love can make us alive.

If we use the law to keep our hands clean of our own motives-if we use the law to feel superior, better than, or always right-then the law works against relationship and kills the mission of Jesus in the world. The Pharisees crucified Christ for the sake of their law. So do we, every day, when we judge and distance ourselves from others to the exclusion of love.

Don't be afraid to go beyond the law into the murk and peril of human motives and of people who don't fit your idea of "right." Life is messy, and God won't hold it against you if you get messy. After all, God has been getting his hands dirty in human affairs for millennia-can we do any less as we try to reach back?

If your motive truly is love, God will bless you for it. Trust God for what doesn't yet fit neatly into your brain, and relax.

Our mission is to love others as we love ourselves, and to love God with everything we've got. Those are the true great commandments

When the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him,

they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them.

(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders;

and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, bronze kettles.)

So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?"

He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

*'This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;*

*in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.'*

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand:

there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.

For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder,

adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly.

All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”