

Dirty Hands, Clean Heart

Proper 17 b
Mk.7.1-8,14-15,21-23

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I wonder if you remember as I do being sent to the sink by your mother to wash your hands before she'd let you sit down at the dinner table when you were a kid? Did you have to do one of these: present BOTH sides for inspection, fronts and backs?

Well, that remembrance may seem almost comical to us, but I can't help but think that the Pharisees sound just like mom in the gospel today, when they complain that Jesus' disciples are eating without washing their hands. Good hygiene is not their concern, though. Jewish tradition insisted on ritual cleanliness at all times, and especially after going to market for food. You simply HAD to wash your hands before eating. That was the "tradition of the elders." And you know how tradition is. You just don't fool around with tradition.

Actually the Pharisees' intentions were a little less noble than just keeping tradition. You see, they knew that these disciples took their lead from their "hot shot" leader Jesus, who these Pharisees didn't really like. And if this Jesus wasn't teaching or observing the Jewish traditions, then maybe they could get this guy right here and now and put an end to all the furor he was causing among the people.

But, of course, Jesus is no fool. He turns their observance of tradition right around on them and accuses these pious Jews of all show and no substance. All tradition and no meaning. All ritual and no heart. All nit-picky law without really observing or even understanding the meaning behind it.

For example, look at Pontius Pilate, elsewhere in scripture. He can wash his hands till doomsday, and he will not be able to wash away the evil that sent an innocent man to die on a cross. The crowd said, "Crucify!" And since the crowd held the vote, he settled on the politically prudent way, keeping his power and position safe. That's what kind of dirty little heart he had.

Or take Lady MacBeth in Shakespearian literature, walking in her sleep night after night, rubbing so desperately to wash that blood spot from her murderous hands. "A little water clears us of this deed," she had said so confidently to her husband after killing the king. But now in her sleep walk, "All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten" or remove the stain of ambition and murder from her hands or her heart.

Christians do not have a tradition of ritual hand washing. But we do have traditions that we keep. Sunday morning worship is a tradition. Volunteer work like serving in the Food Pantry or singing in the choir or serving on council or a committee is a tradition. Advent wreaths and poinsettias and ashes and palms and Easter lilies are all Christian traditions.

People see us involving ourselves in these traditions. And they know that we are part of this church. They know that we are Christians by the traditions they see us do.

Or do they? Does our observance of traditions speak as loudly as our whole lives?

Christ argues that observance of traditions may not tell what is in the heart. Others argue the point as well. Like 1 John: "He who says he is in the light and hates his brother is in the darkness still" (1 John 2:10).

And Ezekiel: "Ho, Shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? . . . The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the crippled you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought . . ." (Ezekiel 34:2b,4).

And Amos: "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:21-23).

In other words, Christianity is not just what happens in our Sunday morning traditions. Christianity is not just what happens here in this building. The world is the arena where Christianity happens.

And you are its representatives. You are the people who are out there on the front lines where ministry happens. You are the ones who daily come into contact with people who don't know Christ's love and the joy it brings.

You are the ones who daily come into contact with the temptations of life -- the questionable business ethics, the questionable model that says, "Take what you can get, any way you can get it," or "Do it because everyone else is doing it," even if doing it means robbing your own employer. You are the ones who are placed in the world as Christians, as an example of one who knows a better way to live.

Christianity is not just what happens here. It's what happens in your heart and in your daily life. That's the whole point of Christ's argument with the Pharisees.

That's the whole point of our second less from the book of James: be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, avoiding the sordid and wicked, keeping yourself pure and unstained by the world. "Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers," James says.

That's the whole point of so many Old Testament prophets: "God has shown you, O my people, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

Now I know, this could be a heavy thing to live up to -- if it weren't for one thing: namely, that you ARE a Christian. And that means you are Christ's. And Christ is in you and with you. Being the example of Christian living in the world isn't the bad news, because the Good News is Christ's promise: "I will be with you always" (Matthew 28:20). His Holy Spirit dwells in each and every one of you since your baptism -- guiding you along the righteous path, enabling you to reach out to others, empowering you in the face of choice and decision.

And the traditions of the Church are here to help you in that task. That's what the Church and the traditions are for. At every communion, you are filled with the Body

of Christ -- pumped up, encouraged, enlivened, strengthened for your work. And then sent out: "Go in peace. Serve the Lord."

Thanks be to God for the One who loved us even unto death, and teaches us to reach out and love others. Thanks be to God for Christ's presence in our eucharist and in our daily lives. For alone, we would surely be doomed to fail. But with Christ in us, our discipleship knows no bounds.