

Clean Hands and Clean Hearts

Pentecost XIV ~ Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

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In today's Gospel reading, Jesus is focused on what is inside a person, in the human heart. He does this by confronting the law-abiding Pharisees who were the largest and most influential religious-political party in New Testament times. (*learnreligions.com*) They were highly educated Jews who saw themselves as a reformist group, consisting mainly of lay people, not priests, who believed that the faith of Israel ought to be something lived in the daily life of every Jew, not merely something observed by the priests in Jerusalem. (*Progressive Involvement, August 2018*)

The Pharisees strictly adhered to the written Law of Moses, the Torah with its 600-plus laws. They also believed that oral law, "*the traditions of the elders*," and its interpretations was just as authoritative as the written law. Keeping Torah was a way of living continually in God's law, including the special ritual of hand washing.

In the Old Testament this was required only of priests, but in the years before the time of Jesus it had spread and had been made an essential part of life for anyone who wanted to follow God's ways – something that God had not commanded. Practicing Jews in Jesus' day were very strict about law and now the Pharisees were applying this standard to Jesus and his disciples.

Ritual hand washing involved dribbling a small amount of water over your hands up to your elbows, not enough to get your hands clean, but getting your hands clean wasn't the idea. It had nothing to do with hygiene. The intent was spiritual cleansing: washing away spiritual contamination. It was a nice idea, an acknowledgement that we needed cleansing, a way of getting right with God three times a day, rather like saying grace before meals.

Some Pharisees believed themselves to be holier than thou, which brings us to today's Gospel interaction.

As these Pharisees and scribes watched Jesus and his disciples they noticed that they were eating without having washed their hands beforehand. When they saw this, they found fault: Jesus and His followers were ritually unclean sinners, and the Pharisees and scribes challenged Jesus: "*Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?*"(v.5)

Jesus didn't respond with an etiquette lesson or an explanation of personal hygiene. *Instead, he called the Pharisees and scribes what they were: "hypocrites."*(v.6) They allowed their traditions to distract from their beliefs. This is what Jesus criticized in his fellow Jews: he pointed out to them that the keeping of tradition was more important to them than obeying God's Word. And so Jesus quoted the Old Testament prophet, Isaiah: *This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.*

For Jesus, sin was the human spirit gone wrong. The issue wasn't about hand washing; it was about the state of the human heart. In his view, the Pharisees should have been more concerned with teaching God's deeper requirements of love, compassion and justice. Jesus also said that it is not what goes into a person that makes him unclean, but rather what comes from his innermost being. ***For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come.*** (7:21)

A perfect example of the defilement of the heart can be found in a fictional literary character from the 19th century. (*the following story adapted from Our Daily Bread, July 19, 2012*):

In Oscar Wilde's Victorian novel, "The Picture of Dorian Gray," [*the youthful and handsome Dorian Gray has his portrait painted. But after seeing and admiring his own appearance, he dreads the prospect of growing old, and he wishes the portrait would grow old in his place. Soon Dorian realizes that his wish has been granted. The portrait, which mirrored his troubled soul, aged and*

became more hideous with each sin Dorian committed, while he himself remained youthful. His outward appearance did not match his corrupted heart.]

Physically, Dorian Gray was perfection. Spiritually he was a monstrous portrait of evil. This story "illustrates how the person we project to others may be very different from who we are on the inside." (Our Daily Bread, July 19, 2012) and Oscar Wilde's allegory directly mirrors the message of today's gospel – You can't change what you are from the outside. The real you is within you.

Our reading from James further illustrates this in verse 23 and tells us to look at ourselves in a mirror. Imagine if you had a special magic mirror. It doesn't just show your face, your skin, what you look like on the outside. It shows you what your heart looks like. It shows who you are on the inside.

Would you want to look in that mirror?

If you did, what would you see? Do you come to Jesus with a clean heart? Do you come to Jesus with clean hands? The distinction between the way of life of the Pharisees and the deeper meaning given by Jesus is clearly stated. We can become very shallow if we only fulfill traditions and pay no attention to where our heart is.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. (Psalm 51:10)

Amen