

Looking Under the Luster

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

If you go into the restroom in any restaurant now you will see a sign that says, "Employees must wash their hands before returning to work." You never ask why; you just hope and pray they obey the rules. If you go into any hospital now you will find multiple dispensers of hand sanitizer on the walls outside the rooms, on the wall next to the elevator, and other places as well. The medical community tries hard to stop the spread of harmful germs, bacteria and viruses, from one person to another. All these public health measures have developed during my time in ministry over the last forty years. We've discovered that a great many illnesses are not caused by exposure to the elements like wind and rain and cold. Sometimes we catch things from another's sneeze or cough, or breathing the same air in an airplane. Sometimes we become exhausted and our ability to fight off invasive pests with our built in immune system becomes compromised. But most often we contract things by hand to hand contact; at least I think that's the theory now. I even saw an instruction sign recently detailing how to properly wash my hands. It was oh so informative! So wash your hands will you!

Today most of us don't see any connection between hand washing and our spiritual life, our well known bromide "cleanliness is next to godliness" notwithstanding. We're great at putting things in separate compartments, bodily things here, soul matters there, and spiritual matters, well, somewhere where they won't be too troublesome and get in the way of things we think we want to do with our bodies and our souls. But it wasn't always so.

Psalm 24:3-5 says this: *Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully. They will receive blessing from the Lord, and vindication from the God of their salvation."*

The link between clean hands and pure hearts had a long history in Israel going back at least as far as Leviticus when God set up the priestly ministry with

its prescriptions and proscriptions; this is allowed, this is not; this may be done, this may not; here's how to function as a priest in my presence and here is what must be avoided. The rituals for serving as God's priest became codified, and then lavishly embellished by subsequent generations of Pharisees and scribes.

The world became divided in their view between clean and unclean. Lepers were commanded to shout out, "Unclean," to give clean people warning to avoid contact with them due to the fear of contamination and of contracting the dread disease. In Deuteronomy, a priest who was deemed clean was ready to serve in religious observances; one deemed unclean for any one of a number of reasons was not fit. In Exodus, there is the prohibition of any person with a physical defect serving before the Lord. Often, when accompanied by a sufficient offering uncleanness could be removed by ritual washing. Physical deformities obviously could not be removed by washing.

The question is, was all this ritual piety an end in itself or was it prefiguring a deeper spiritual truth yet to be fully revealed. We who believe in Jesus Christ as our perfect high priest see the rituals of washing as preparatory in the anticipation of what Jesus finally revealed and fulfilled. Jesus was not only a high priest without defect, perfect in every way; he was also the perfect sacrifice for sin, the lamb without blemish or spot. Jesus is like us in every way except without sin. He washes away our sins by making an offering of himself. Jesus' opponents could not yet see the deeper dimensions opened up through his ministry. They were too fastened on external appearances and supposed violations of their standards of holiness. No one was free to mess with the traditions of the elders.

The Pharisees and scribes, who came down from Jerusalem, Israel's spiritual center, were men on a mission. Their passionate aim was to find a way to discredit Jesus, whom they saw as being a loose cannon in their tightly ordered religious world. Jesus was seen as a bull in the china shop of their piety. In their eyes, Jesus paid insufficient respect to their well established and closely obeyed traditions. One of their favorite sets of regulations focused upon hand washing before eating.

Earlier in Mark 6 I think we can detect a backdrop to the offense that so deeply offended them in chapter 7. There we read about Jesus feeding 5,000 men, not to mention women and children, with five loaves of bread and two fish. That day, 7 divided by 5,000 left a remainder of twelve baskets full. You do the math if you can. To the hungry crowd it must have seemed like the miracle of manna all over again. And I'd bet not one of the hot and hungry, the sweaty, dusty crowd went off to find water to wash their hands before dinner.

To most of the people that day the miracle was an awesome display of God's power and God's goodness. Rather than giving thanks for the miracle, the powers that ruled religion saw it as a threat. Rather than opening their hearts to Jesus they thought, "This eating with unwashed hands is getting out of hand. What's next?" They couldn't have people running around disregarding their carefully catalogued rules for religious behavior. They feared an outbreak of spiritual anarchy over which they would lose control. Jesus had to be resisted and exposed as a religious charlatan before things got much worse.

So they put the crucial question to Jesus: "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" For them, defilement had to do with violations of accepted rituals. One meaning of the word defile is to trample. These unwashed common people were about trampling tradition under foot simply to get a bite to eat.

Other related words in the definition of defilement are: to debase, to take what is important and treat it as unimportant. They doggedly held to the importance of adherence to their observable rituals while ignoring the deeper things. Their emphasis on exterior things tended to trivialize the hidden affairs of the heart.

Another meaning of defilement is to violate the sanctity of something, to desecrate it, to empty it of its sacredness and make it common. Clean hands were thought to insure a pure heart. If you see me wash my hands can you then infer that I have a pure heart? If only purity of heart were that simple to gain. Pharisaic and scribal purity worked from the outside in. In Christian faith the

order is just the reverse. Purity begins inside and becomes manifested through our lives.

Through Jesus Christ, we take simple, common things and see them as holy. We use ordinary water for baptism, pray that it be used by the Holy Spirit to do the extraordinary work of marking and sealing a person as God's own child and as a member of Christ's Body. We say that the Sacrament of Baptism is an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace. There is a similar dynamic at work in Holy Communion. We take ordinary bread and wine, and then consecrate these elements, asking the Lord to set apart common things for their holy and sacred use. Words like holy, sacred, inward, and invisible point to things occurring down below the surface of our lives where true transformation takes place.

Another notion associated with defilement involves contamination where one thing is infected by contact or association with something unwholesome or undesirable. Guilt by association was hurled at Jesus repeatedly: "Look, he eats with tax collectors and sinners! Look, he allows a sinful woman to wash his feet and anoint him with precious ointment! Look, he and his disciples eat with unwashed hands!"

The same perennial problem beset them as the one that still besets us today when we set out to become religious. It is easier to have clean hands than pure hearts. We can perfect the techniques of hand washing all we want, but to develop and live out of a pure heart is something else altogether. Anyone can see dirt on your hands. The impurities of our hearts tend to be invisible until we tip observers off by our moral and ethical misbehavior.

By this point Jesus had about enough of their pious wrangling. He quoted their Temple darling from days gone by, the prophet Isaiah, and pointed his biting words toward them. Jesus said, "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.'" I'm sure they were thinking, "Hey wait just a minute; that scripture is not about us!" Just to tighten the noose, Jesus gave the example of how they used their traditions to dodge the responsibility to care for their elderly parents, saying the

money they could have used was dedicated to the service of God instead. Jesus said this is how you religiously violate the commandments of God. And Jesus said, "You do many things like this."

At that point Jesus turned to the teachable crowd and said, "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." In one deft stroke, Jesus moved the debate from matters of religious ritual observance to the ground of moral and ethical behavior. Heart condition is much more important than hand condition. It's not the show you put on; it's the deeds you do that tip the balance in one direction or another, either toward sacredness or toward desecration. It is of key importance how we treat one another.

Jesus then gave a representative list of behaviors that indicate a defiled heart condition. Such lists were common in the ancient world as a tool to teach about morality. A defiled heart develops a whole raft of what Jesus calls evil intentions. Evil intentions are those things which can do harm to another person.

Jesus' list is illustrative not comprehensive. The first few items have to do with taking from another person that which does not belong to you.

Fornication is using the body of another for your own pleasure. Fornication has nothing to do with giving deeply of your own soul as a gift of love and intimacy to another. Fornication is a form of usury. It is not the same thing as co-habitation which has become so common in our culture, though co-habiting couples may be practicing little more than fornication. Sexual intimacy is intended by God to express a deep, embodied, spiritual union that enhances self giving love in many forms in a relationship. Fornication is to take part of another's soul without a firm covenant commitment to be faithful. And it usually ends up being harmful to both partners.

Theft is to take what belongs to another. Murder, the ultimate theft, takes the life of another. Adultery takes the mate of another. Avarice grabs resources that could be used to benefit another through charity and generosity. Wickedness describes the intention to do evil to someone else. Deceit robs

another of the truth. Licentiousness is living without proper boundaries around your behavior. You do whatever you feel like doing with no regard for the cost to others. Envy, slander, pride, and folly, all these things destroy human community.

To sum up, the things that defile are not trivial matters. Defilement does not come from violations of external religious rituals. What really needs cleansed is the human heart filled with sin. That's the work that Jesus came to do.

We who congregate around the religious institution called the church need to be constantly vigilant that our rituals don't move in and subtly take the place of our vital relationship with Christ. Christ, in deep love, will always be guiding and correcting us, moving us along the path to ever increasing depths of love and life. Religious ritual if we are not careful can lead us to adopt the form of religion but deny its power to convince and convict and convert us. Stay awake. And never settle for the luster when deeper down you will find true love.