

Pastor Joe Polzin
Mark 7:1-13
“Clean Hands, Dirty Hearts”
Year B – Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 26, 2018

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

If you were able to sit down for fifteen minutes with a Governor, U.S. Senator, or even the President of the United States, what would you choose to say? How would you decide if you knew that you were going to get their undivided attention for that amount of time? It would require some thought, wouldn't it? You'd have to think about what is most important, and get straight to the point.

Well, the Pharisees and scribes had that moment, not with a Senator or President, but with Jesus. Now, Jesus' ministry was at full tilt. He had fed the five thousand, he had walked on water, he had been attending to the constant demand from the crowds. Here's how Mark put it at the end of chapter six, right before our Gospel reading today: “And wherever [Jesus] came, in villages, cities, or countryside, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and implored him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well” (6:56).

Jesus was in such high demand, that even the fringe of his garment had a full schedule. Which made it interesting that the Pharisees and scribes, who had come all the way from Jerusalem in order to talk to Jesus, chose to spend their precious time with him talking about *hand washing*. They had noticed that his disciples didn't properly wash up before a meal, and so they asked Jesus, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” (7:5)

Mark takes time to explain the tradition they were referring to: “All the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there were many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches” (7:3-4). Now this wasn't hand washing for sanitary purposes, this referred to a ritualistic hand washing before a meal. And apparently, some of the disciples weren't following these traditions to the standards of the Pharisees.

Of all the things they could have talked about with Jesus, this seems like a pretty odd choice, at least to us. But it wasn't odd for them. You see, the tradition of the elders was a very well-established code of conduct. They were a specific set of teachings that were meant to keep the Jews from breaking God's Law. Detailed practices that acted like a fence around the commandments so they wouldn't even get close to breaking the Law that had been given by Moses.

Now, to give them the benefit of the doubt, they had good intentions in establishing these traditions, as they were meant to help people keep the Law of God. But over time, they lost sight of the very Law they were trying to protect, as it was replaced with their own man-made doctrine. And what made it worse was their spirit of self-righteousness, and their looking down their noses at those who didn't do as they did.

That's why, when the Pharisees and scribes saw the disciples not following the tradition of the elders like them, their assumption was that these disciples who eat with defiled hands must not care about God's Law, and therefore are defiled people. Of course, Jesus saw right through

their false pretense of piety, and he goes after the heart of the issue. He points out two different problems having to do with hypocrisy, hypocrisy having to do with their relationship with God, and the other having to do with their relationship with other people.

The first example of hypocrisy is when we make every effort to make it appear that we have “clean hands” before God, but fail to see the true state of our dirty hearts. Jesus said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men’” (7:6-7).

This is where the term “lip-service” comes from, and here it has to do with our standing before God. Paying lip-service to God. When we think that what we’re saying sounds so good, what we’re doing looks so good in our eyes and in the eyes of others, that we begin to believe that God must think we’re good, too. It’s what the Pharisees thought every time they cleaned their hands so precisely. But they failed to see their dirty hearts. Hearts that are corrupt by nature, that have no ability to please God on their own. Hearts that are far from God, no matter how close to Him they thought they were.

Many people assume that because they’ve gone to church enough, read their Bible enough, served on particular board enough, given to church enough, given to charity enough, or generally try to be a “decent person” enough, that all that must be enough in God’s eyes, too. Now, don’t get me wrong, those things are good. But not if you think it’s what earns you God’s favor. You can never do enough of your own deeds to earn God’s love. You can’t earn salvation by your own works.

The second problem of hypocrisy Jesus addresses has to do with our relationships with other people. Jesus said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban”’ (that is, given to God)—then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do” (7:9-13).

Part of the tradition of the elders had to do with giving special offerings, that’s what “Corban” means. These would have been gifts *above and beyond* what was required to give. But some people were dedicating large portions of their finances as Corban, finances that should have been used in part to help take care of parents and family. And because they dedicated it like this, they were excused from having to use their finances in a way that honored their parents, keeping their money for themselves, and sometimes never actually giving it away.

But how grand and generous they must have looked. “So-and-so has dedicated this much money to God according to the tradition of the elders. How pious of him!” All the while, the true commandment of God to honor your parents remains unfulfilled. And that’s the true tragedy of their hypocrisy. While God would not have been fooled by any of their false pretenses, many people around them were. They were able to climb the ranks of religious reputation at the expense of those they actually should have been serving. They were stepping over and stepping on those they should have considered greater than themselves.

Who are we stepping over, or stepping on, in order to appear better than others? What loopholes have we figured out that frees us from the burden of actually having to care for others? When someone who’s hungry and homeless asks for money, we’re really good at coming up with a hundred reasons why we shouldn’t help them, when all Jesus gives is one for why we should: love your neighbor as yourself.

Or when we consider our own offering to the church, but we may begin to think about the certain standards of living we feel we need to keep up, or the certain comforts we particularly enjoy, and we make sure we put on good display of giving, but we know we're far from what God expects us to do.

Or when the church turns inward on itself, valuing itself so highly, and making it their primary goal to serve our own needs, that slowly over time, we find ourselves desiring the security of a balanced budget, trading it for any sense of pursuing our God-given mission to help the needy, to seek the lost, or to share the Gospel.

Of course, there are a thousand ways that it's quite easy to make ourselves look pious and righteous and holy, especially when we arm ourselves with traditions and doctrines that we make up ourselves. When that happens, the actual command of God to love Him and love our neighbor ends up void and unfulfilled.

Isaiah describes this well when he said, "You turn things upside down! Shall the Potter be regarded as the clay, that the thing made should say of its Maker, 'He did not make me'; or the thing formed say of Him who formed it, 'He has no understanding'?" (Isaiah 29:16). When we neglect what God wants us to do, we are like clay who denies our Maker, and instead we fashion things the way we'd like them to be. All the while, in our hypocrisy, our self-righteousness grows and our neighbor suffers.

Hypocrisy can destroy the Church. It destroys us, it destroys others, and it destroys our reputation in the eyes of the world. How many times have you heard someone say, "I'm never going to church again, not with all those hypocrites in there"? So, what's the answer?

Well, the answer to hypocrisy is not to buckle down and try to make ourselves more self-righteousness. The answer to hypocrisy is to stop being a hypocrite. And by that I mean, if you are a sinner, the only way to stop being hypocritical is to stop denying that you're a sinner. Stop seeking to make yourself look better than everyone else, and realize that you, yes you, are no better than anyone else before God, no better than anyone else in this church, and no better than anyone else out on the street. Because you're *not*, and neither am I.

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us," Scripture says. We are all on equal footing before God. Equally sinful and unclean. And once we realize that, we realize how foolish it is to try to make ourselves look better than one another, or to try to make ourselves look better before God. Because He knows our hearts. In humility, we can only come before God, not with clean hands, but rather with hands that are defiled and hearts that are dirty with sin.

Only then, only when we're honest about our sin, can we understand the depths of God's grace. Because God didn't send Jesus for righteous people. "None is righteous, no, not one," Romans says (3:10). And God certainly didn't send Jesus for the self-righteous. I think he made that pretty clear in today's Gospel. No, the reason Jesus came was to "seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). The Son of God and Son of Man, Jesus Christ, never once considered himself above this sacrificial mission. He says later in Mark, "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:45).

Christ came to a people of defiled hands and dirty hearts, and took all our sin, all our hypocrisy, all the times we think we're better than others, all the times we take what God says and turn it into something we would rather hear, when make the Potter the clay, and the clay the potter, and Jesus took it all to the cross. He defiled his own clean hands, and allowed those hands to be nailed to the cross to pay the price that our sins deserved. And he did this not to condemn

us, but to save us. Not because we deserved it, but precisely because we couldn't ever deserve it. "God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us," that's true. But, the wonderful promise that follows is this, "If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8-9). We are cleansed by Jesus, and the flood of his forgiveness. Our dirty hands and hearts are cleansed, not by our efforts, but by the effort of Christ. And when we come to know that amazing grace, and the love that led Christ to give his all for us, we can't help but respond in faith by loving him, and loving our neighbors in return. In Jesus' name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. **Amen.**