

Everybody knows that before you eat you should wash your hands. In our germ-obsessed culture we have all kinds of soaps and hand sanitizers and wipes that are intended to keep us safe from illness and disease. Especially during flu season, we know it is a good idea to wash hands often in order to protect ourselves from bacteria and viruses that can make us sick. We keep hand sanitizer here in the narthex and I know that some of you all use it before and after shaking hands with others. And we are advised to wash our hands frequently to protect ourselves and others from picking up these germs. It's science that tells us that keeping ourselves and especially our hands clean greatly reduces the amount of illness and death from illness. Washing our hands before eating is a good thing, right?

So why is there a controversy here in Mark over something as simple as hand washing? Don't Jesus and the disciples know that it's healthier to wash your hands before you eat? Aren't the Pharisees just trying to keep them safe? What's going on here?

To set the stage, when we were last in Mark, Jesus and the disciples were on their way to Genessaret. A lot had happened: John the Baptist was dead; there had been a large gathering of people who had heard Jesus preach and then been fed in a miraculous appearance of food; and then as the disciples sailed away Jesus came to them by walking across the water.

Now they are in Genessaret, and some Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem have come to see what all of the fuss is about. Jesus and the disciples have been working hard, healing people from all across the region who had come to them. They are having a meal and the contingent from Jerusalem notice that they are eating without having washed their hands. They ask Jesus, *why are your disciples not acting according to the tradition of the elders? Why do they eat without washing their hands?* That's the Contemporary English Version translation, by the way; the Good News bible says *ritually unclean hands*, while the NRSV says, as you see in the bulletin, *defiled hands*. It all means about the same thing; the issue here isn't germs so much as it is holiness or purity and tradition.

In the early days of Judaism, when the Holiness codes were established, it was part of the ritual of sacrifice that the priests would wash their hands, up to their elbows, before touching the meat. Fast forward to the time of Mark's gospel, and note that in between the Jewish religion had undergone many troubles, including the exile—a time when most Jewish people were separated from the temple and unable to worship there, unable to make the required sacrifice. These were some traumatic times for God's people; at times it was very hard to remain set apart as God's people were supposed to be. Over time washing hands before meals became the norm, as a way of keeping their uniqueness in difficult times. At this point there was no particular understanding that handwashing was good for the physical health; it was understood to be a *ritual cleansing* to keep the handwasher holy in God's eyes. In other words, handwashing was a primary way of demonstrating righteousness.

The issue that Jesus seemed to have was that this ritual was created by humans. It might have originally been a ritual created by God, but that ritual was for the priestly class and only used during animal sacrifice—and it was likely designed to keep the *sacrifice* pure rather than the priest. That's what I think, anyway.

It is because this handwashing was human tradition, rather than an actual part of the Holiness Codes, that Jesus quotes the lines from Isaiah: *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.*

What the lectionary leaves out of this passage today goes on to explain: *Then he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition!"*¹⁰For Moses

said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.' ¹¹But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, 'Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban' (that is, an offering to God)— ¹²then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, ¹³thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this."

Jesus then goes on to say that nothing outside of a person can defile them—in other words, can't make them less holy or pure. It is what comes out of a person that makes them impure. What goes into a person, what they eat, goes into the stomach, not the heart; but what comes out of the mouth comes from the heart. Our intentions, our speech, our actions toward others come out of us from the heart, thus it is our heart that makes us pure or impure.

This is spelled out in the epistle of James, when he says *let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger, for your anger does not produce God's righteousness*. What comes out is what defiles us, makes us unrighteous—or makes us righteous.

And this is where it comes in handy sometimes to read gospel passages side by side with the epistles. One way to consider the NT epistles is as early commentaries on Jesus' teachings. Close reading gives us a window into the early church and early attempts to understand and interpret the good news, the message of Jesus.

The Epistle of James was probably written in the late 1st to early 2nd century to an audience of Jewish Christians dispersed around the Roman empire. It is possible that it was written as a tract or treatise that was given to early Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem that they could take home with them to share with others; or perhaps to help them live into the Christian life in their location. The epistle of James is often read as being in opposition to Paul's theology of *justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ* because of the emphasis in James on works. However, Paul and James both are concerned with a faith that is *lived*; in other words, it is more accurate to say that they are fighting a common problem—faith as magical thinking.

In today's passage from James we see this argument begin to build—and it is very similar to what Jesus is saying in Mark. At the end of Mark's passage, Jesus says ²¹*For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²²adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.*" while the epistle of James says ¹⁹*You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. ²¹Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.*

What does this mean for us? How can we apply these passages to our day and time? First of all, don't stop washing your hands before eating. It's good health! However, don't believe that because you wash your hands, or eat particular foods while fasting from others you become somehow more righteous. Similarly, anger is an honest emotion--- it's how we use it that matters. You see, the law wasn't supposed to be this rigid narrow thing that it is sometimes portrayed to be; rather, it was a framework for how the people were to live together as people of God. That's why Jesus could say that the two most important commandments were to love God and love our neighbors—that to do these things means fulfilling the law.

How does this guide us as we're out there, living in the world? First of all it's helpful to know that "out there" is the place of our primary ministry and mission in the world. We come to church to see and

support and show love to one another, but to follow Jesus, to be disciples, means being in the world where we might meet others who need to know what Jesus taught and how he lived.

Second, remembering that our speech and actions come from within—from our hearts—and show other people what our hearts look like. Rash speech and anger, along with that laundry list that Jesus gives, don't build up and strengthen relationships but tears them down. Jesus and James are both telling us that the quality of our bonds with others is important, vital even, to our spiritual health. And the way to strengthen those bonds is through our actions, our outward expression of our inward condition.

All of this, of course, is to strengthen and grow the body of Christ.

Traditions are fine, and realizing that we don't have to earn God's grace is wonderful, but it's no good having faith that isn't backed up with actions. The body of Christ, the kingdom of God isn't built on our faith alone, but on the actions that come out of us because of that faith. To the glory of God. Amen.