“Wash Your Hands?”

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

James 1:17-27

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One of the commentaries I read this week began its section on today’s Gospel passage by saying, “It is difficult for Christians [today] to comprehend the issue raised by the Pharisees in this passage, because the idea of physical holiness is alien to our understanding of religion.”

While it is certainly true that we might have difficulty comprehending the issue that the Pharisees raise in this passage from a holiness standpoint, after the past year and a half of pandemic life, I think for the first time in a long time, we can still appreciate the Pharisees’ initial reaction to seeing someone eat without having washed their hands first.  After all, cleanliness is next to godliness, right? Or, at the very least, cleanliness is next to “not getting Covidness.”

In the past 18 months, I’ve found myself gasping aloud or at the very least, doing a double-take when I watch scripted tv and see two characters get close to each other without a mask on, or walk through a mask-less crowd at a concert, or, God forbid, kiss someone they barely know. What are you thinking?? I want to ask. Where’s your mask? Where’s your social distancing?? THAT IS SO DANGEROUS!

Three years ago, when this text last popped up in the lectionary, I probably would have read it and thought, “Come on, Pharisees. What’s the big deal?”

Maybe like no other time, do we get to feel a little kinship with the Pharisees. Who can argue with their desire for clean hands when it’s time to eat?

But it’s important to note that the Pharisees’ protestation against the disciples’ unclean hands has nothing to do with germs — in fact, the actual theory of germs causing disease won’t appear until at least 1000 years later.

No, the Pharisees are mostly concerned with ritual cleanliness. While we might think of the cleanliness rules as only applying to the temple officials, the actual interpretation of those rules is a little different.  There are many verses in the Old Testament which speak specifically to the temple priests as to how they might make themselves worthy of the office to which they have been called through ritualistic purification rites.  But there are also a few verses in which the instructions are expanded to include more than just the temple officials, to include all of Israel.

Specifically, in Exodus 19, God tells the people, “You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.”  Throughout the years, this verse and others like it had been used to indicate that it wasn’t just the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, and other temple officials who needed to purify themselves, but the entire nation of Israel. They were to be a *priestly kingdom* and a *holy nation*. This meant that they should follow all of the purity rules, from babies to adults, temple priests to temple custodians. Everyone.

So that is where the Pharisees are coming from when they object to the disciples breaking bread without purifying themselves. It’s not germ-related, it’s religion-related.

And that’s Jesus’s point. Their objections are religion-related, instead of faith-related.

The Pharisees had transformed these guidelines for worship into an idol -- instead of something that helps them worship God more fully, it actually distracts them from worship.

Where the Pharisees think that they know what is most important to God, in Jesus’s response, we get a better idea of what is important to God.

Quoting Isaiah, Jesus reminds the Pharisees that God does not look kindly on hypocrites - on those who honor God with their lips but their hearts are far from God.  Instead, Jesus would call us to remember a different portion of Isaiah, in which God asks the people,

“Is this not the fast I choose?

to loose the bonds of injustice,

   to undo the thongs of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free,

   and to break every yoke?

7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,

   and bring the homeless poor into your house;

when you see the naked, to cover them?

*That* is what Jesus would rather the Pharisees, Sadducees, temple officials, and *us* frankly, to choose.  *That* is how God would have us worship.

Because...we are not exempt from having our own Pharisaic moments.

Jesus isn’t telling us to live lives of anarchy -- ignoring the rules and regulations that the rest of the world is bound by. Jesus (and God) know that as human beings, we crave a sense of order. We need rules. Without rules, we struggle.

There was a great movie that came out in the 90s that every 90s kid loved because it was every 90s kid’s dream. Camp Nowhere was about a bunch of middle schoolers who decide to invent their own kind of camp instead of going to the ones their parents wanted them to attend. Using an elaborate plan involving lying to their parents, brand new 90s-era technology, and even blackmailing an out-of-work drama teacher played by Christopher Lloyd to act as the camp director, the middle schoolers are able to trick their parents into believing that they are attending whichever computer/drama/military camp they had been sent.

All goes well...until the kids get bored. After all, there’s only so many ice cream dinners and video game competitions you can participate in before it starts to get old. After a while, the whole plan implodes, parents and the police are called in, and the kids realize that maybe a little structure isn’t so bad after all.

A little structure is never a *bad* thing. God knew that when dictating the 10 commandments to Moses. God knew that the people of Israel, in their newly-found freedom would crave some boundaries and instructions.

But it’s when the boundaries become barriers to God, when we’ve gotten distracted by all of the rules and all of the gate keeping, that we might manage to cut ourselves off from God, or even worse, to attempt to cut off others from God.

*That* is Jesus’s beef with the Pharisees and their traditions.  And we need to look around and see if Jesus would have beef with us and ours.

Have any of our worship guidelines become barriers, burdensome rather than liberating in our worship here at Covenant? These could be written into our Presbyterian Book of Order, but they could also be unspoken traditions and expectations which aren’t expressly communicated, but by which we judge ourselves and anyone else who might enter our sanctuary or join us online.

Are there any traditions that we cling to so tightly, but we can’t even remember the spirit in which that tradition first came to be? Do we ever find ourselves saying, “Well, that’s the way we’ve always done it” or, “We’ve never done it that way”?

There’s an old joke that goes like this:

One day a little girl was watching her mother make roast beef. She watched her mother cut off the ends, wrap the roast in string, season it, and set it in the roasting pan.

The little girl asked her mom why she cut the ends off her roast. Her mom replied, after some thought, that it was the way she’d always seen her mother do it.

That night the grandmother came to dinner and the little girl and her mom went to her and asked why she had cut the ends off of the roast before cooking.  After some thought, the grandmother replied that it was the way she’d always seen her mother do it.

Now, the little girl’s great-grandmother was quite old and was living in a nursing home. But the little girl went with her mom and her grandmother to see her and again asked the question: “Why did you cut the ends off of your roasts when you made them?”

The great-grandmother looked at them all — little girl, mother, and grandmother — and said in an annoyed voice - “So that they would fit in the roasting pan. Why else would I trim a roast like that?”

It’s interesting how quickly traditions are often established, but also how quickly we forget their origins and purposes after a generation or two.

Wearing your “Sunday best” to worship has long been the norm in our particular tradition and comes from a place of respect for worship and for God, but would we ever consciously or subconsciously shun an adult who showed up on Sunday in jeans and work boots?

Moments of silence for contemplation and prayer have always been appreciated and even expected for worship in our tradition. And while we say that all are welcome here at Covenant, do we ever find ourselves getting frustrated by the voice of a child or the sounds of a fussy baby during a sermon?

Traditions are not bad. But, tradition for tradition’s sake and not God’s sake in worship, is not just meaningless, but as Jesus warns the Pharisees, can lead to a kind of purity test that only the insiders can pass. And that’s not a test that Jesus would ever be okay with.

The only kind of test that Jesus cares about is one that asks - is this tradition life-giving? Does this tradition come from a God-centered focus?

And how will we know if our worship is life-giving, God-centered worship?  In today’s passage from Mark, Jesus lists the kinds of sin that come from a human-centric worship practice: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, etc.  But there’s another list from Galatians that shows us what the good things we can expect when we refocus ourselves on God and away from ourselves.

This list includes: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

When our worship is centered in Christ, we can expect those fruits of the Spirit to be present. Maybe not all the time, maybe not all at once. But we can still expect to find them sprinkled throughout the life of the church - in our study, in our prayers, and in our play.

Jesus’s approach to worship was difficult for those in charge to accept. He forced those in authority positions to examine themselves and their worship practices. He helped shed a light on some of the practices that might need some adjusting.

It can be helpful to have someone or something remind you of what is most important — both in our lives and in our worship. I think in some ways this pandemic has shown us that. A few minutes earlier, I mentioned chatty children and fussy babies and our reactions to them. If there is one thing that I’ve missed, it’s having children in this space with us.  On our first Sunday back in the Sanctuary for the 10:30 service, a baby began to cry during the prelude.  I teared up immediately. I didn’t realize how much I’d missed that sound. I think a few of the 10:30 folk might have had the same reaction, too.  The pandemic helped remind me that when we gather as a people in worship, we are *all* a part of worship, from the oldest among us to the youngest. Maybe I needed that reminder. Maybe you did, too.

As things hopefully return to normal in the coming months, may we use this time of re-gathering to take a deep look at our worship practices and invite the Holy Spirit to guide us in our introspection, helping us to reclaim and to hold on to the traditions that help focus our hearts on God, but also trusting the Spirit to help us dismantle traditions that that turn our attentions elsewhere.  And may all of our lives, whether in worship, work, or play, produce those fruits of the spirit that are needed now more than ever.

All praise be to God.

Amen.