

OT 22B-18
Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23
September 2, 2018
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“Beware of Clean Hands”

Every evening before dinner, the kids here the same call: “Dinner’s ready. Go wash your hands.” We don’t eat before we share a prayer together. And we don’t begin the prayer until everyone’s washed their hands and is sitting at the table. Because cleanliness is important to me. In fact, for a while, cleanliness became too important to me.

Of course, it wasn’t always this way. As a kid, I couldn’t have cared less about dirt or germs. Even through my early 20’s, I never thought twice about pushing open a public restroom door or holding some railing that hundreds of others had touched that day.

But that changed when I worked at a hospital during my time in seminary as a student chaplain. Joel and I both spent time as student chaplains as part of our pastoral training. And wisely so. It was a growing period. You learn a lot as a student chaplain—not just about caring for those who are sick, but you learn a lot about hospitals and healthcare in general. You learn some medical language and get to see a huge healthcare system from the inside out. I even got to observe some surgeries in order to better understand what patients face.

And I still vividly remember, within our orientation and training, they made a big deal—or at least it seemed like a big deal to me— how mindful we had to be of our cleanliness. There were strict instructions that required us to wash or sanitize our hands before walking into any patient’s rooms. And rightly so. Patients with open wounds and suppressed immune systems deserve intentional care. So the hospital made sure to teach its chaplains to always... always clean our hands before going anywhere near a patient.

Natural and rational, right? Except... all that talk about germs and viruses and the like got me thinking about dirt and cleanliness in a way I never had before. So it wasn’t long until I began to find myself washing my hands all the time even when I wasn’t in the hospital. I began to notice every time I touched something others had touched—like a door handle or an elevator button. And, it bothered me. I mean, the hospital had taught me just how many germs you can find on a public door knob. So before I knew it, I wasn’t just washing my hands in the hospital, I was washing my hands everywhere I went. I didn’t want to be dirty... or germy... or, just, unclean, you know?

Now... fast forward to today, and I no longer wash my hands 100 times a day, nor do I carry around hand sanitizer with me. But there is a bottle of it in my office... And I do make sure to wash my hands every time before I eat, not just before dinner. Because, admittedly, cleanliness is still important to me.

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So when we were on vacation, and my nephew dropped his lunch on the ground and fried shrimp spilled everywhere, I said, “Oh, gosh, Will, I’m so sorry. Let me buy you a new lunch.”

“Why would you do that?” he asked. “They’re fine.” Next thing I know, he bent down, picked them all up, dusted a couple of them off that were extra dirty, and enjoyed every last bite. I admit—I was both disgusted and impressed at the same time!

I should also add, he’s my brother’s son... and my brother loves—loves—to do things he knows will gross me out... like putting one of his kids’ sneakers in his mouth... or intentionally dropping his gum on the ground and then chewing it some more. Because it does—it skeeves me out.

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So if I’m being honest... totally honest... there’s an element of that for me in our passage that Max read for us. I mean... as Mark tells it, this is a story about a bunch of guys—Jesus and his disciples—eating with dirty hands! And evidently... this doesn’t just bother me... it *really* upset the Pharisees. They say, “Hey Jesus, what gives? Don’t you take law and tradition seriously? Don’t you know it’s against the Torah for you to eat without washing your hands first?”

You see, the Pharisees, they too cared deeply about cleanliness. For them, cleanliness really was next to Godliness... but not necessarily for the reasons we might expect. It wasn’t that they cared about germs—they obviously had no idea about bacteria or viruses back then. Rather, the Pharisees were a group of Jews who believed that God had called all of Israel, not just the priests, but each and every Jew to honor the priestly laws of the Torah. So they believed that every Israelite had to honor the priestly laws that said things like, you have to wash your hands before ministering at the altar... which then meant you had to wash your hands when sacrificing animals at the altar... which then meant you had to wash your hands before eating meat that had been sacrificed at an altar... which then meant you had to wash your hands before eating.

Now... you don’t have to follow that line of logic. Just know the Pharisees believed mealtime was a sacred time... and you should only come to God, they taught, if you were clean. You were only welcomed by God if you were undefiled... pure... unstained. Both physically—in the flesh—but also religiously and morally.

So before you approach something sacred—like a meal—with dirty hands—they said you better wash them. And before you enter the Temple and worship, you better be clean... clean from disease, clean from defilement. So if someone around you is dirty—well then, you better avoid them, lest you become defiled simply by being near them. So don’t you dare eat with someone who was considered unclean, or dirty. No sir... a good Hebrew, they taught, would not—could not—share a meal with someone who was dirty—unclean—impure.

This is part of why the Pharisees were so offended in other parts of the Gospel to find Jesus eating with known tax collectors and sinners. A good Hebrew, they taught, should never associate with someone like that—let alone eat with them!

But Jesus wasn’t having it. He wasn’t about to wash his hands, or ask his disciples to wash theirs. He was perfectly comfortable with a dirt... and people others thought of as being dirty. I mean, the gospels show us time and again, Jesus’ folk were the dirty folk. That’s who

Jesus hung out with and ministered to most of the time, right? The beggars, the lepers, the tax collectors and the prostitutes, the Samaritans and the Syrophenians, the sick... all those that the good people of society looked down their noses at... the people that the rest of society thought they were better than... the people who would cause an audible gasp if they entered the synagogue... looking so dirty and smelling so bad.

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It should make us consider, friends... who would cause an audible gasp here? Who wouldn't feel welcome here? Please don't get me wrong... I believe we take our call to be inclusive seriously, TPC. But let's be honest, as I look out at the lot of us... we're a pretty clean bunch of people here this morning—you and me. Our clothes are clean... our hair is clean... and that's okay... but you know... our hands are also clean. Probably too clean for Jesus' liking!

- I mean, where's the outcast who may not belong anywhere else, but sure as heck belongs to God? Where's she?
- Where's the undocumented immigrant who's being told every day he doesn't belong here and yet, he still belongs to God. Does he know he's welcome here?
- Where's the addict who's struggling every day to overcome something she can't control? And feels helpless... and hopeless? Does she know she's invited to this table?
- Where's the young man who thinks his life is far too gone to ever be redeemable? That no person—let alone God—could possibly love him. Does he know Jesus is waiting to serve him here?

I mean... seriously... where are the dropouts? The gang members? The beggars? The prostitutes? Do they know this table is just as much for them as it is for you and me? Or... do they not know they're welcome here, because we're reluctant to get our hands dirty?

For the plain truth is that the outcast and marginalized of our society won't know they're welcome here unless we invite them! The folks out there who need the grace this meal conveys just as badly as we do... they're not gonna know they're welcome here unless we are willing to get dirty ourselves... and demonstrate our care... reveal our compassion in acts of care and relationship-building, so that we can share love and grace with them... that they—and we—might come to better understand what Jesus teaches us in our lesson today. Namely, it ain't what gets on or goes in a person that can make them unclean... the only things that do that are what come out of us... like our pride... our envy... our snobbery... our extravagance. Those are the things we should worry about, Jesus says. Not our cleanliness, but our unwillingness to get dirty in order to embrace those in need of love.

“So examine your hearts before you examine our hands,” Jesus tells the Pharisees... a charge we'd do well to heed. For as much as I might like to pretend otherwise, the Gospel of Jesus Christ doesn't call us to a clean, sanitized way of life. No way. The Gospel of Jesus Christ begins on the outskirts and the margins... calling us to get our hands dirty as we build a kingdom where all... all know they're invited to the feast. Amen.