

Introduction

“The Pharisees, along with some religion scholars who had come from Jerusalem, gathered around Jesus.” They gather around Jesus because they are the good guys. They gather around Jesus because they are the leaders. They are the deacons and elders, the ministers and seminary professors who are responsible for guiding the religious life of God’s people. And when they gather around Jesus they **“notice that some of his disciples aren’t being careful with ritual washing before meals.”** **“Some of them are eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them.”** Now, if I believed in re-incarnation, I would be convinced that this entire gang of scribes and Pharisees has morphed into a single soul and come back to life as my wife. No one entering our kitchen is permitted to to prepare a meal, set the table, or sit down to eat with defiled hands. Ask our son Harrison Sindima what is the one question he’s sure to be asked when he shows up for dinner at our house. *“Did you wash your hands?”* And unlike in Malawi, or Palestine we usually don’t even eat with our fingers. Of course you have to understand that Darlene is married to a man who doesn’t believe in the germ theory. Which is why I got all excited when I read this story. I wanted to be able to preach the good news that even Jesus says it doesn’t matter if you wash your hands all the time! But alas, I read on and came to realize that this incident is not about handwashing after all. No, it’s about cleansing all right, but a cleansing of the heart.

I

“Why do your disciples flout the rules, showing up at meals without washing their hands?” demand the Pharisees. Yet, Jesus doesn’t even try to defend his dozen dirty-handed disciples. Instead he quotes the prophet Isaiah, **“This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They make a big show of saying the right thing, but their heart isn’t in it.”** In other words, God’s people had developed an unnatural disconnect between the head and the heart. In biblical understanding the heart is the seat of emotions, intellect, and will. It is the heart that speaks to God. **“Come,” my heart says, “seek the Lord’s face.”** (Psalm 27:8) It is the heart which that receives God’s word. **“The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.”** (Deuteronomy 30:14) It is the heart that is inspires to action. When Nehemiah is inspired to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem he writes **“I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. (2:12)”** The heart of religious life engages our body, mind, and spirit. When Jesus is asked what commandment is the first of all, he reiterates this fundamental truth.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and (or including) with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” **“All your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy.”** (Mark 12:30) However, the religious leaders of His day had turned faith into kind of intellectual exercise. Passion was replaced by tradition, prayer was strictly prepackaged and formalized, intelligence was co-opted for service to the status quo, and energy was misdirected into strenuous rule keeping. **“Why do your disciples flout the rules?”** ask the Pharisees. Jesus replies, **“Isaiah was right about frauds like you... These people make a big show of saying the right thing, but their heart isn’t in it. ... You abandon the commandment of God in order to keep your traditions!”**

II

Ouch! That hits awfully close to home doesn’t it? What we won’t do in order to keep our traditions. We love to badmouth the Pharisees but let’s be candid—we ourselves don’t take it too kindly when people flout the rules. It’s not just eating without washing their hands, but even worse—showing up at worship without **sitting** on their hands. Of course unlike the Pharisees, most of our rules are unwritten.

For instance, no grubby clothes, no rowdy children, no enthusiastic prayers, and (God forbid) no speaking in tongues. Think about it. For hundreds of years we denied ordination to women in order to guard our tradition of patriarchy, we denied communion to baptized children in order to keep our tradition of guarding the Lord’s table, we disallowed the use of organ music and hymn singing in order to hold onto our tradition of chanting the Psalms. TRADITION! Of course tradition is not a four letter word. We are certainly no better off **“Ditching**

God's command and taking up the latest fads." Jesus does not even say that the tradition of ritual hand washing is in itself a bad thing. Instead, he tries to get us to loosen up about the externals, saying: **"There's nothing outside a person that by going in can defile."** Obviously, he's not talking about poisons like drugs and alcohol. Nor is he advising parents to permit their young children to consume trash from TV, internet, music, and other polluting influences. Nevertheless, he makes it crystal clear that **"Whatever goes into a person (or a congregation) from the outside cannot defile but the things that come out are what defile."** **"It's not what you swallow that pollutes your life; it's what you vomit—that's the real pollution."** It's what comes from the inside out that counts. **"It is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come,"** cautions the Lord. **"Obscenities, lusts, thefts, murders, adulteries, greed, depravity, deceptive dealings, carousing, mean looks, slander, arrogance, foolishness—all these are vomit from the heart. There is the source of your pollution."**

III

And here (Bible) is our source of pollution control. The Bible contains everything we need to know to clean up our act. The letter from Pastor James is a good place to start. According to church traditions, James carried the nickname "Old Camel Knees" because of thick calluses built up on his knees from many years of determined prayer. Determined prayer is where pollution control begins. **"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me."** prays the Psalmist (51-10). It's a prayer we would do well to memorize. For only God can cleanse our emotions, our intellect, and our will from such pollutants as arrogance, deception, and slander. And here's the good news! The cross of Christ is God's permanent pollution control plant. Christ invites us to dump all our garbage at the foot of Calvary where His great love can recycle our hearts, putting "a new and right spirit within us." **"There is nothing deceitful in God,"** says Pastor James, **"nothing two-faced, nothing fickle."** **"He brings us to life using the true Word."** That true Word is the Word-made-flesh in Jesus Christ, who, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, dwells among us as risen Lord. **"So throw all spoiled virtue and cancerous evil in the garbage."** encourages James. **In simple humility, let our gardener, God, landscape you with the Word, making a salvation-garden of your life."**

IV

"But" he also warns, "be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves." ... "Don't fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other." James knows that too often we are like a congregation of ducks. If it sounds like you've heard this story before, it's because you have. Nevertheless, I think it bears repeating. *Every Sunday the ducks waddle out of their houses and waddle down Main Street to their church. They waddle into the sanctuary and squat in their proper pews. The duck choir waddles in and takes its place, then the duck minister comes forward and opens the duck Bible. He reads to them: "Ducks! God has given you wings! With wings you can fly! With wings you can mount up and soar like eagles. No walls can confine you! No fences can hold you! You have wings. God has given you wings and you can fly like birds!" All the ducks shouted, "Amen!" and they all waddled home.*

V

Well, in a world where two billion people earn less than a dollar a day, 35,000 die each day of starvation, and countless others have never experienced the good news of God's love, we must do more than waddle home. *Service is the Point.* That is the title of a challenging book by one Presbyterian Church leader who claims that **"Less than 10 % of those who gather each week for worship typically take part in any specific Christian service like feeding the homeless or working to help the poor or visiting the shut-in."** That may be so, yet, even as we celebrate this Labor Day holiday, we must acknowledge that one of the reasons for lack of direct involvement in service is lack of time. Beginning in the late 1940's Americans have worked increasing hours each decade. By the 1990's the average American worked a month longer per year and had 40% less free time than in the 1970's. Not surprisingly, employed parents with children at home are stretched the thinnest. So, if service is

indeed “the point,” then it should be pointed out that there is no greater service than raising healthy children or serving God and neighbor through your work in teaching, healing, business, or industry. Nevertheless, the bottom line remains the same. As St. John asks rhetorically, “**How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?**” (I Jn. 3:17) At the Interfaith Food Shelf and Hospitality network we see brothers and sisters in need. At the hospital and in nursing homes we see a brother and sister in need. In Malawi Darlene and I have seen brothers and sisters in need and shared those images with you. When God opens the the eyes of our heart we cannot help but see our brother and sister in need. What’s more, together we have the means to do something about it. So, **If we turn a cold shoulder and do nothing, what happens to God’s love? It disappears.** That’s why James, in accord with the Master, insists that we “**be doers of the word and not merely hearers.**”

Conclusion

Listen to this cartoon conversation between Calvin and his imaginary tiger friend, Hobbes. Calvin: “*Hobbes, do you think our morality is defined by our actions, or by what’s in our hearts?*” Hobbes: “*I think, our actions show what’s in our hearts.*” Calvin, (looking chagrin): “*I resent that!*” A clean heart is not a matter of faith or action, rather it is about faith in action. Jesus never asked his hearers “*Do you agree with me.*” He said “*follow me.*” To be sure, tradition is an important guide as we seek to be faithful in acting upon Christ’s call. However, let’s not kid ourselves. Neither honoring the oldest traditions nor taking up the latest fads will make us faithful disciples if our heart isn’t in it. Folks, Christ wants it all—“**All your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy.**” Before you leave here this morning, I pray we’ll let him have it.
