

Eating with Defiled Hands
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Song of Solomon 2:8-13

8 The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills.

9 My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice.

10 My beloved speaks and says to me: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; 11 for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.

12 The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.

13 The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away."

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

1 Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him,

2 they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them.

3 (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders;

4 and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.)

5 So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?"

6 He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me;

7 in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' 8 You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

14 Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand:

15 there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are

what defile."

21 "For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder,

22 adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly.

23 All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

This is the hard-to-hear, challenging Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

We've been sick at our house this week. Back-to-school germs I like to call them. Apparently, we're not the only ones. The back-to-school germs are so bad this year, that, coupled with worries about various strains of the flu, they have pushed our school system to send out weekly communiqués about how they will deal with illnesses and outbreaks in the schools and about how we should deal with illness at home.

Teddy had a fever and a headache for one day, so we followed the rules—for the sake of everyone's health and safety stayed at home for one day after the fever was over.

Jack did not have a fever—just coughing, sneezing, runny nose, so we followed a different set of directives – fluid, rest, cough into the crook of your arm, and *lots and lots of hand washing*.

The schools, in fact, are reporting right now that they are emphasizing hand washing in class and increasing their signage about hand washing.

Hand washing is increasingly understood as something that can help prevent the spread of disease, keep us healthy, keep those around us healthy. We wash our hands before meals, when we've gotten something on our hands, after we use the restroom, after sneezing, after handling raw meat... The list goes on and on.

This is such a prevalent practice, that last Sunday, when the youth came into Sunday school and I asked them to go wash their hands (and sing the ABC song while they were at it) they didn't find it odd. They thought maybe we were going to eat something or maybe I had gotten especially worried about swine flu.

Later, when I read this Mark passage to them, one of the first thing they noticed was—ew!—the disciples didn't wash their hands!

And as we see in the passage, the Pharisees balked too. Like the school telling me how long to keep my children home and what practices to follow to keep all of us healthy, the Pharisees had codes about how to get clean, how to be clean, and how to stay clean.

But they weren't worried so much about their health. We are worried about germs. The Pharisees had no concept of germs. They were worried about being clean before God. The Pharisees had 100s of years of tradition that told them how to be holy. And a lot of this focused on washing—washing hands, and food and pots and pans.

And while we may look at all that washing tradition as wise and before their time—the Pharisees saw it not as something that kept them healthy, but as what kept them right before God. The external washing kept them pure. If they followed the right rules, they were OK—in God’s favor.

Like our world, with germs that spread from hand to doorknob, doorknob to new hand, their world was one of easy infection, too.

If a ‘clean’ person (washed, holy in the sight of God), came in touch with something ‘unclean’—a person, an animal, a pot, the ritual must start all over again. They were tainted. They could not stand before God.

In the world of holiness codes, uncleanness was viral and highly contagious.

This made the Jews different from the other people around them. But they didn’t just make them different. Their codes set them apart. They created boundaries between the Jews, who followed these codes, and the Gentiles (or everyone else) that didn’t.

And if you didn’t follow the holiness code, you were unclean. And, remember, uncleanness was contagious. So, if you were a ‘good Jew’, following the tradition of the elders, you don’t go around all these ‘other’ people. You don’t hang out with them. You don’t get to know them. You certainly didn’t eat with them, because if you do, you ‘catch’ their uncleanness.

And so, we have the Pharisees in our story, who diligently fast and wash their hands and only eat with those who do the same. They are concerned about all these things AND are VERY concerned about the actions of the Jews who do anything differently.

If you go back in Mark a little, you’ll find that this isn’t the first time they’ve come to Jesus asking him to account for what his followers are (or aren’t) doing:

- Why aren’t they fasting? They’ve asked.
- Why do you all eat with sinners (that would be people who don’t keep the code)
- And now they’ve noticed that *some* of Jesus’ disciples are eating without washing their hands, and so, again, they ask him about it.

You see, to the Pharisees, this not washing hands probably means one of two things. Either these disciples of Jesus are flouting the tradition of the elders, infecting everyone with their unholiness, and undermining the structures that shape their society and keep the Pharisees in power, OR They’re not people of the law to begin with. They’re outsiders. Non-Jews. And therefore, unclean, and contagious, and a threat to the whole society.

Either way, Jesus is cavorting with these people who are unclean. And this is unacceptable.

You heard Jesus’ harsh words in response. He calls them hypocrites—people who give lip service to God, but care more about the workings of their world.

He says that they abandon the commandment of God, for their own traditions.

If we're religious people (and I have a hard time thinking we'd be sitting or standing here today if we weren't), then we have our purity codes. We have the tradition of our elders. We have our ways of being and ordering our lives together—which in the beginning is all any purity code is supposed to be. A way of being together before God. A way of being faithful. A way even of group discernment.

So we have our Book of Order, our Book of Confessions, our General Assemblies, our session meetings. We have the 'way it's always been done' and the 'way it worked before.'

We have our holiness code, and it's a by-product of living together in community as a people of God, rather than being a lone-wolf Christian (if there even is such a thing).

So this purity code is not a bad thing in it's essence—in fact, it can be a beautiful thing that helps us live in community. (Rehoboth)

BUT there is another by-product.

These codes we create for ourselves create insiders and outsiders. The people who know them and the people who don't. The people who feel called to follow them, and the people who don't.

And sometimes when we encounter the people who aren't washing their hands the right way, whether because they don't know or they don't care to, the lines get fuzzy over what is a tradition of the elders and what is the commandment of God.

We're Pharisees, and we get worried that if we don't wash our hands the right way, we may fall out of favor with God.

We worry that if we do our rituals the wrong way, don't meet at the 'right' time of the week, don't document the meetings correctly, we may fall out of favor. We worry that if our programs don't look like they used to or don't look like the other Pharisees down the street, then we may have fallen out of favor. We worry, like my 9-year-old son, that if we question the things we hear in church – the teachings of our elders and the words in the book we call holy—then God may get mad at us, and shun us.

We worry about it for ourselves, but we usually express it by pointing out when others are doing things the "wrong way." Like the Pharisees, we confuse things that are written to help us live together, with rules that we must follow at the sake we worry that other people not following the code is going to rub off on us.

It's then that we need to remember that we are washed by something other than the tradition of the elders. Our baptism, even, is only a sign and seal of a grace that is already given. A sign to remind us that we stand before God, clean and pure and holy already. When we look at the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, we can be assured of that when Brian Blount spoke at the Tri-Presbytery training event last week, he said that if we look at Jesus' life, we'll notice that he's

turning the Pharisees' understanding of purity and cleanliness on its head. Instead of becoming dirty when he touches, say, a leper, or eats with someone outside his race/class/gender—instead, the 'unclean' person is suddenly 'clean'. This is dramatically shown in the deliverance of demon possessed people. It is more commonly shown in Jesus eating with people with defiled hands—people who don't know to or don't care to follow the rules of the religious people.

We look at this, and we are assured that we, too, despite all our fumbling and bumbling Pharisaic ways, are washed clean.

And that assurance releases us. It releases us from the fear of being shunned by God. Without that fear, we come to a freedom in our dealings with each other. We can realize that we have been put in the position where we can be like Jesus. Where our presence, our touch, our acceptance of other people, whether they are following the rules or not, can be signs and symbols of all of our cleanliness before God.

When Jesus said that the Pharisees neglect "the commandment of God." I can't help but think of what Jesus said was the greatest commandment—to love God with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind *and* to love our neighbor as ourselves

Those two, in the way Jesus spoke, are inextricable. One doesn't happen without the other.

So in loving God, we're freed to ignore the boundaries that we ourselves have created, and love others. This love isn't some nice, trite politeness.

When our hearts are near to God, rather than far, it's a love that comes from the very core of us. A love that trumps the fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly and other wicked things that can come from within when we're trying to protect our boundaries

It's a love that breaks boundaries and turns church and societal expectations on their head.

It's a love where we're not afraid to touch the unclean. Whether that literally means touching someone who might have a disease that we find scary. Or it means changing hundreds of years of church tradition because we've realized that it may be constructed on an un-loving principle.

It's a love like the one in Song of Solomon, where we want to know the 'other' so badly, that we stand at the wall, gaze through the windows, look through the lattice—We do everything we can, to get close to and truly understand 'the other'.

This is the rule that should **guide** our holiness codes—this commandment of love of God and neighbor so that when we do gather to decide the questions that *could* tear us apart like the Lutherans and the Episcopalians have done lately, like the Presbyterians will do again in another year we are honestly aiming at the heart of God, rather than honoring God with our lips only and spouting human-derived doctrine.

We make this radical love our rule so that when we sit in committee meetings or Sunday School and realize we have different ideas about how to interpret scripture, different ideas of what it means to be Christ's body in the world, different ideas of what the sacraments mean and what the confession means...

we make love our rule so that we don't spout off which theologian's idea of scriptural interpretation we adhere to or stomp our feet and say 'but that's what the Bible says' putting up our boundaries and calling the other 'unclean' in whatever our modern-day way of saying it is.

Because those times, when we hunker down and dig our heels in and claim to know the one right way anything should ever be done—that is the when pride kicks in. That is our folly. That is when we're Pharisees in the worst sense. That is when we're defiled.

Instead, when we're aiming at the heart of God, we look at those we sit at table with, those we gather here with, those who wander in off the street in the same wild, unabashed way that lovers look at one another. We look at the other person and delight in their differences. Delight in the way they challenge us to look at ourselves and our assumptions more closely. Delight in the way they challenge us to come away and see life from a different place from where we've always stood.

If our hearts are moving closer to God, loving God more and loving neighbor more, I truly believe we'll be called away to new and different places. Those places that challenge tradition. Those places where boundaries are being broken down.

They're scary places for those of us who are used to following tradition. And we'll hear the voices of the Pharisees crying out over and over again that we are doing things with defiled hands, worried that uncleanness will rub off on them – on all of us.

But if we pay attention, those are the places Jesus went. They are the places Jesus is now—the places where love trumps propriety, and compassion trumps doctrine.