

St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Sermon by Rev. Erik Broeren
Sunday, September 1, 2024

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?” (Mark 7:5)

I am a big fan of British comedy and one of my favorite characters is Hyacinth Bouquet, spelled B-U-C-K-E-T; it's bouquet. Hyacinth is a stickler for formalities; all things have their own proper order and right way of doing. She is a self-declared expert in etiquette. I'd like to contrast her with Pauline Philips; America's answer to all questions of decorum and propriety. Pauline and later her daughter Jeanne have been answering questions of proper etiquette since the 1940s, reaching an estimated 110 million people. Better known as Abigail van Buren or *Dear Abby*, Pauline and Jeanne Philips have become an institution in this country, answering questions posed by an eager audience trying to figure out the proper thing to do. How to extend hospitality to a troublesome neighbor; how to keep the peace between feuding family members at the Sunday evening dinner table; how to host a wedding reception that balances formal traditions with a casual atmosphere that makes everybody feel at home. More than looking for just the right and proper thing to do, *Dear Abby* often looks to honor human relationships, and to bring healing when those relationships have been hurt or broken.

As we return to the Gospel according to Mark this week, admonitions and accusations fly around most freely. The Pharisees encounter some of Jesus' disciples at mealtime and they witness them eating without first washing their hands. (Mark 7:1-2) To us, people accustomed to high standards of personal hygiene, it seems an appropriate admonition, for we all, I trust, wash our hands many a times each day. And since the early days of COVID, we have all formed a deep friendship with Purell. So, we are surprised that Jesus, when challenged about his disciples' unsanitary practices, reacts with anger and calls his accusers hypocrites. (Mark 7:6) Can you imagine being called a hypocrite as you suggest somebody washes their hands before they sit down to eat a meal?

Now, in all honesty, we can only guess about the sanitary practices of people living two thousand years ago. Lacking knowledge of germs and bacteria, and accustomed to more basic life circumstances, sanitary practices may indeed have been more relaxed as compared to today's standards. Or perhaps they were not, for surely the results of bad hygiene were immediate. In fact, Scripture and archeology give us clues that washing was actually an important element of daily life; not a mindless chore we perform almost without thinking, but an action undertaken with intent and purpose. For the Pharisees,

washing one's hands before a meal had a practical and religious dimension. Sometimes those things – the practical and the safe, the prudent and the religious – are intertwined.

I do not want to go into great detail about Jewish thoughts on purity and cleanliness, other than to say that many of these practices already in Jesus' time had a long-established history, with traditions grounded in the holy texts of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Many things in life would leave one unclean, and there is an explicit acknowledgment that if one is to go about *holy* business, that is, those things to do with God, one is to first clean and purify oneself, both in a practical and spiritual way. Scripture does not always tell us *how* to do this, and different practices and habits developed over time – the so-called traditions of the elders. Pharisees observed them; Sadducees did not; and, perhaps, many Jews did not. Some commentaries suggest that most Jews did not. So, Jesus and his disciples are in good company.

We witness in our reading today, a debate that would have separated Jews in different camps: is it proper to wash one's hands before a meal? To us, the debate is settled, but to them it was a culture war, just as we have our own culture wars today. Faithful to the letter or intent of founding documents and sacred texts, people reach different conclusions about contemporary questions, and, by extension, speak a verdict over others. It is intense and it is personal.

Jesus calls his accusers hypocrites, quoting Isaiah, saying that in their service to God they “honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” (Mark 7:6; Isa 29:13). Rather than focusing on outward actions alone, on observing mindless rituals without awareness or intent, Jesus calls us to focus on the thought behind the action.

Let's explore this point from a different angle. In ethics, there are two major schools of thought. First, deontological ethics which evaluates deeds on the act alone: if you take something that doesn't belong to you, that is stealing, and stealing is always wrong. Remember the commandments? Second, teleological ethics which evaluates deeds on their particular intent: if you take something that doesn't belong to you but with it feed someone to keep them from dying of starvation, that act might be justified. Now, Jesus often defies categories, but he seems to be pointing us towards this second train of thought; to not just look at the appropriate action alone, but also at the disposition of one's heart. “For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come... and they defile a person.” (Mark 7:21.23)

After Jesus' death, the early church makes a fundamental decision to stop observing any ritual practices that have to do with ritual cleanliness, thus severing itself from its Jewish roots. Yet, remnants of this ancient debate can still be found in our Eucharistic practice.

Each week, as the priest sets the table for our sacred communion, *after* placing bread and wine on the altar, the priest turns to wash her or his hands. It appears that this action is done because of hygiene – I am about to handle bread and wine that I will give to you. But we all know that this little sprinkle of water, without soap, has little or no hygienic effect, and certainly not after the sacred food has already been handled. As the priest washes one’s hands, a silent prayer is said: Lord, wash me from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. Though it is an outward act – the washing of one’s hands – it addresses an inward conversion – the state of one’s heart and mind.

I am not suggesting that Jesus is simply a proponent of one school of religious, spiritual, and ethical thought, clashing with another. In all of this, still the Good News of God is at stake. Evaluating ourselves and others based on outward signs or inward intentions only serves to create separation between people: between us and our neighbors; between those who do it the right way, and those who do it wrong; between those who hold the right beliefs, practices or opinions, and those who do not. Setting up divisions is the way of the world, and we do not need any help with that, divinely or otherwise; we are pretty good at it. The Good News is the elimination of those divisions. God knows our actions, and God knows the intentions of our heart, and still, God says; “You are my beloved child.”

The radical love of God revealed in Jesus Christ is that we all are acceptable to God, regardless. And though my brothers and sisters may believe different things, hold different practices sacred or holy, defend different goods or pursue different goals, we all are one, as God is one, and we gather around God’s table to eat and drink, with washed or unwashed hands, to form a new holy communion with God and each other. Amen.

Oh, and when you come to communion. My hands will be washed. As a matter of public health, as a matter of care for our common wellbeing, and as a matter of faith.