

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9; Psalm 15;  
James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Maybe you behave the way I do. I like to keep my hands clean, especially before I sit down to eat dinner. I always wash my hands. And perhaps your family is like my family; you may have the tradition also of washing your hands before coming to dinner or other meals. Much in the same way as other traditions, hand washing is in fact the entrance key to dinner at my house.

When I was a little boy I remember coming to the dinner table, the dialogue going something like this: “Tommy, did you wash your hands?” I would answer, “Yes, Mommy.” Then after always seeming to sense my dishonesty, my mom would then ask the most convicting question (to this day it still gives me chills). She would then ask, “Can I smell the soap?” There was no need for me to continue in my charade; I was caught in a lie.

I was busted and would sulk back to the bathroom, ready to not only run my hands under the water, but use soap as well. And now the curse (I mean the tradition) continues with my own children. The same dishonesty is addressed, and the same outcome is eventually achieved.

So what’s the big deal about this hand washing that Jesus talks about? What is it? The ritual of hand washing makes good sense, after all, doesn’t it? The spread of bacteria gets people sick, and we’re less likely to get sick if we have clean hands, right? So why does Jesus give such bad advice to His disciples? Well, I think the apparent logic of the Pharisees seems to make sense here. And it sounds a lot like us as parents, as we direct our children to clean their hands before dinner. They even sound like good parents, yet Jesus calls these Pharisees hypocrites and quotes scripture pointing to their sin. I can see it now – all of the children quoting scripture from the gospel of Mark in protest for parent-directed hand washing. Can’t you see it?

Well, apparently Jesus is telling the disciples, the Pharisees (and us, for that matter) something that’s a little different than simple germ defense precautions. You see, Jesus is not concerned with flu outbreaks. What Jesus *is* concerned about is how tradition is actually getting in the way of the people’s worship. In fact, He’s pointing to how tradition has *become* their worship.

Now, we know all the rules that are in the Book of Leviticus – rules about cleanliness, uncleanness; they are spelled out very particularly: the washing of hands, food, body parts, pots, pans had to be done, and it was done for generations by the Israelites. The tradition itself had become the worship focus, and not God.

You see, Jesus is concerned about the way people use ritual to deny God’s commands; Jesus is concerned how people use the commands of men instead of God’s command. The scribes and Pharisees here want to see with their eyes the people following the rules. They want to see it. They want people to know that they have all the right answers. They want people to know that they can get you clean before you come to see God. They are not interested that the disciples were just involved with the feeding of the poor, with tending to the sick. The Pharisees have begun to ignore the scripture teaching to minister to the sick, the poor and the widow. All they

are concerned about is appearances; they want to show the others in the community that they're perfect – perfect at following the commands of men.

And don't we often feel the same way? If I keep my hands clean, then you can't accuse me of being unclean, right? But this is exactly where the problem lies. We become focused on our exterior appearances while our interior rots away. The heart rots as we believe we that can hide ourselves from each other. The heart rots as we believe that we can hide that we can hide ourselves from God. And all the while, Jesus teaches God is concerned with where our hearts are. A clean heart, after all, will direct the body, and the heart is a place only God can see. No matter how much I try to hide my heart from you, God sees. And don't we protect our own heart when we judge the hearts of others?

We often point to the Pharisees and show how wrong they are, but do we realize how similar we are to them? You see, when I point to his or her sin, I give my own self a false sense of security, a false sense of protection that I'm better. I get comfortable blaming, but all the way, my heart is not with God.

There's a story by author Bobbie Gee, titled *Legacy of Love*, that I'd like to share with you: As a young man, Al was a skilled artist, a potter. He had a wife and two fine sons. One night, the oldest son developed a severe stomach ache. Thinking it was only some common intestinal disorder, neither Al nor his wife took the condition seriously. But the malady was actually acute appendicitis, and the boy died suddenly that night.

Knowing that the death could have been prevented if he had only realized the seriousness of the situation, Al's emotional health deteriorated under the enormous burden of his guilt. And to make matters worse, his wife left him a short time later, leaving him alone with his six-year-old younger son. The hurt and the pain of the two situations were more than Al could handle, and he turned to alcohol to help him cope.

In time, Al became an alcoholic. As the alcoholism progressed, Al began to lose everything he possessed – his home, his land, his art objects. Everything. Al eventually died alone in a San Francisco motel room. When I heard of Al's death, I reacted with the same disdain the world shows for one who ends his life with nothing to show for it – what a complete failure, I thought. What a totally wasted life.

As time went by, I began to re-evaluate my earlier, harsh judgment. You see, I knew Al's now-adult son Ernie. He is one of the kindest, most caring, loving men I have ever known. I watched Ernie with his children and saw the free flow of love between them. I knew that that kind of kindness and caring had to come from somewhere.

I hadn't heard Ernie talk much about his father. It is so hard to defend an alcoholic. One day I worked up my courage to ask him. "I'm really puzzled about something," I said. "I know your father was basically the only one to raise you. What on earth did he do that made you become such a special person?"

Ernie sat quietly and reflected a few moments. Then he said, "From my earliest memories as a child until I left home at 18, Al came into my room every night, gave me a kiss, and said, 'I love you, Son.'"

Tears came to my eyes as I realized what a fool I had been to judge Al as a failure. He had not left any material possessions behind, but he had been a kind and loving father, and he left behind one of the finest, most giving men I have ever known.”

You see, you and I, we make observations and decisions about people only by their appearance. There are some really good points for us to remember this morning from the Gospel of Mark around text. Just a few verses prior to this text in Chapter 7, Jesus has fed the five thousand. There are leftovers from the five loaves and two fish used. Then Jesus talks a walk on the water. And the Bible says that Jesus would have walked on by the disciples. Had the disciples not cried out, Jesus would have walked on past them.

Have you ever considered what it would be like for Jesus to pass by you? What would it mean if Jesus left our presence?

But instead, thank God, instead He stops and says, “Take heart; it is I; do not be afraid.” Mark then tells us something strange. Mark tells us that the disciples’ hearts were hardened. I think this is a big deal and we shouldn’t gloss over it. The disciples’ hearts hardened. Were they judging others? After feeding the five thousand, were they wondering who are all these people getting a free lunch? Did they feel they didn’t deserve it? Yet even though their hearts were hardened, Jesus climbed into their boat. Take heart! Do not be afraid!

Jesus tells us that even if we have held on too hard to the traditions of man, and even if we have forgotten about caring for the poor and the sick, take heart, do not be afraid. Even if we have judged others and kept our own heart away from God, take heart, do not be afraid. And finally, even if we have pounded our fist on the table, claiming that we were right and our neighbor was wrong, take heart, do not be afraid. You see, Christ stands ready to climb into your boat and to make all of our hearts clean. Christ is ready.

For with clean hearts, we are humbled. With clean hearts we come to the table of fellowship. And with God’s help, not our own, with God’s help we can hold each other up in community. Take heart! Do not be afraid!

Amen.